## Collaboration Between Massachusetts Schools and Families: Interviews with Parents, Students and Providers

A Memorandum to the Massachusetts Safe and Supportive Schools Commission

## Education Law Clinic of Harvard Law School

and

## Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative

**of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School**

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## Executive Summary

1. **Introduction**

Research is increasingly clear that school-family partnerships are a cornerstone of children’s academic and social success at school. As leading family engagement researcher Karen Mapp has written, “The more the relationship between families and the school is a real partnership, the more student achievement increases. … When families are engaged in positive ways, rather than labeled as problems, schools can be transformed from places where only certain students prosper to ones where all children do well” (Mapp 3).

In recognition of the importance of family engagement, the Legislature included as one of the seven statutory charges it gave to the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission (“Commission”) the requirement to “develop recommendations on best practices for collaboration with families, including families of children with behavioral health needs” (MGL

c. 69, § 1P(g)). In addition, the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework (“Framework”) and online Self-Assessment Tool (“Self-Assessment Tool”) include “collaboration with families” as one of the six core operational functions of schools that is implicated in creating whole-school learning environments that are safe and supportive for all students.

In order to assist the Commission with making recommendations related to collaboration with families, and with continuing to develop the list of practices and ideas catalogued under this element of the Framework, the Education Law Clinic of Harvard Law School conducted a set of interviews with participants across the Commonwealth designed to learn about some of the

current challenges and opportunities Massachusetts schools face with respect to engaging their families. This memorandum to the Commission summarizes the findings from these interviews.

## The Interviews

Our primary goal in conducting these interviews was to hear directly from those most directly impacted by schools’ family engagement practices, namely parents and students themselves. Given the Legislature’s specific charge to investigate the needs of “families of children with behavioral health needs,” we chose to use our limited time and resources to prioritize interviews with these particularly vulnerable families. This population of parents and students have many burdens on their time and, precisely because of their vulnerability, can be difficult to reach. Therefore, we also identified groups of community-based providers across the state who regularly assist parents and educators to communicate with each other and often attend school-based meetings with their caregiver clients. Finally, we also spoke to a group of para- professionals – family partners – who wear both the “parent” hat and the “provider” hat and can speak from both perspectives.

A secondary goal was to reach out to geographically isolated parts of the Commonwealth

* in addition to learning about family engagement in our urban centers – to ensure that the perspectives of parents in all different types and sizes of communities are factored into the Commission’s deliberations.

With these goals in mind, we conducted seven focus group interviews throughout February and March 2017 that were attended by the following groups:

* + Parents – Home for Little Wanderers Family Resource Center, Boston, MA
  + High School Students – Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC), Boston, MA
  + Mental Health Clinicians – The Guidance Center, Somerville, MA
  + School Liaisons
    - Vineyard Haven Family Resource Center, Vineyard Haven, MA
    - Quincy Family Resource Center, Quincy, MA
    - Brockton Family Resource Center, Brockton, MA
    - Worcester Family Resource Center, Worcester, MA
    - Amherst Family Resource Center, Amherst, MA
    - Lowell Family Resource Center, Lowell, MA
    - Lawrence Family Resource Center, Lawrence, MA
    - Fitchburg Family Resource Center, Fitchburg, MA
  + Family Partners – Brien Center Community Service Agency (CSA), Pittsfield, MA

## The Competencies

Before conducting our interviews, we consulted the substantial literature on family engagement to acquaint ourselves with the field. We also met with Prof. Karen Mapp at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who served as a special adviser to former Secretary of

Education Arne Duncan on the issue of family engagement and is one of the country’s foremost experts in this area.

Prof. Mapp has identified five core competencies that characterize the work of schools that are effective in their efforts to engage families: 1) Building Relationships; 2) Linking to Learning; 3) Addressing Differences; 4) Supporting Advocacy; and 5) Sharing Power. In our review of the literature, we discovered two additional competencies that seemed important to us:

6) Two-Way Communication; and 7) Connecting to Community. We decided to structure our interviews so that they asked participants questions that sought information regarding the practices of Massachusetts schools with respect to each of these seven core competencies.

## Interviewing Methodology

Given the diversity of interview subjects and locations, we wanted to be sure that the data we gathered was as standardized as possible. We therefore consulted the literature on qualitative interviewing and employed the following techniques.

We began by developing a set of questions for parents in each of the seven identified core competencies; we then translated these foundational questions into language and a form that made them appropriate for students and for providers, resulting in three separate interview protocols. (All three sets of questions are included with this memorandum as Appendices.)

We employed a technique called the “standardized open-ended interview” (Patton 342). In this technique the core questions are scripted in advance so that each group of interviewees is asked a standardized set of questions. The questions were open-ended (as opposed to yes-no or leading questions) and each question was assigned a type (e.g., experience and behavior, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and background/demographic questions) (Patton 348-

1. in order to help the interviewer be clear on each question’s goal, the better to assess in the moment whether we were obtaining the type of answer we were seeking. In order to account for the need to follow up on answers that could not be anticipated, a series of optional “probes” were developed for each of the standardized questions. An interviewer uses his or her judgment to decide whether to follow-up by asking one of the probes.

For each focus group, a single team member served as the interviewer. Additional team members attended each focus group to take notes on laptop computers. The interviews were not tape recorded in order to allow participants to feel as comfortable as possible. Participants were informed that we were going to report on the interviews in this memorandum; we told them they would be quoted in our notes (and possibly in the memo) but that their individual identities would remain anonymous. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

## Structure of this Memorandum

The body of this memo is organized according to the seven core family engagement competencies that structured our interviews. Each section begins with a summary of how the relevant literature defines each competency and what each one “looks like” in a school (“*What the Experts Say*”). Then we proceed to share what our participants said about the practices of

Massachusetts schools with respect to each competency (“*What We Heard in Massachusetts*”). These findings are comprised of the recurring themes we observed in participants’ answers across all seven focus groups (these are in bold) followed by exemplar quotes from participants that illustrate the given theme.

## Our Findings

Summarized below are the themes that characterized participants’ answers to our interview questions with respect to each of the seven core competencies. (The competencies are more fully explicated and the themes elaborated upon and supported with quotes in the body of the memo.)

## Competency #1 – Building Relationships (p. 7)

* 1. Parents desire more frequent, consistent communication from schools regarding their children.
  2. Many parents feel that their child’s school only communicates with them when there are exceptional circumstances or in times of crisis.
  3. Middle and high schools communicate less frequently with families than do elementary schools.
  4. Many parents feel intimidated by their children’s schools.
  5. Parents that do form strong relationships with school staff do so with individuals who make them feel comfortable; to facilitate this, participants advocated for involving parents in more informal, relational settings.
  6. Many immigrant and non-English-speaking parents do not feel welcomed or supported by schools.
  7. Many parents do not feel they have a strong relationship with their child’s teacher.
  8. Teachers have significant constraints on their time and schools experience general resource constraints; increased support staff at schools could help with this problem and improve family engagement.

## Competency #2 – Linking to Learning (p. 13)

1. Caregivers want more opportunities to communicate directly with teachers about what and how their child is learning.
2. Elementary schools are more likely to involve caregivers in their child’s learning; in the higher grades, a focus on student responsibility and autonomy seems to make schools more reluctant to involve parents.
3. Caregivers would like to be given clear expectations for the role schools want them to play in their child’s education.
4. Caregivers need informational tools to help their child with his or her learning.
5. Sometimes the school’s efforts at engagement do not consider the needs of working families.

## Competency #3 – Addressing Differences (p. 17)

1. Caregivers would like to see their cultures reflected in the diversity of staff at the school, as well as in school events and programming.
2. Some caregivers perceive that they are treated differently because of cultural stereotypes held by school personnel.
3. Many parents experience significant language barriers in their attempts to communicate with their child’s school, but some schools have found ways to overcome these barriers.
4. Parents in small towns shared a unique barrier in relating to school staff: being excluded or treated differently because of their family’s intergenerational reputation in a community where everyone knows everyone else.

## Competency #4 – Supporting Advocacy (p. 20)

1. At IEP meetings, caregivers appreciate the presence of an outside provider.
2. Caregivers and students would like educators to actively solicit parent input about their child’s education.
3. Parents are very knowledgeable about their child’s learning style and would like to be asked how their children learn best.
4. Caregivers would find it helpful for schools to be mindful of their schedules and language barriers when creating structures for their input in students’ learning.

## Competency #5 – Sharing Power (p. 23)

1. Most parents do not have a say in school-based decision-making.
2. Caregivers want to be involved in groups like parent councils but experience barriers to participating.
3. Parent leaders are not representative of the school population.
4. Parent council involvement varies depending upon the type of school.
5. Parents, providers, and students suggested that schools raise awareness about council meetings by improving communication and access to families.

## Competency #6 – Two-Way Communication (p. 27)

1. Caregivers find it helpful when schools have a dedicated person to assist in communicating with them.
2. Using technology to communicate with caregivers can be helpful, but only if they are supported to access the technology and it is available on the devices they typically use.
3. Two-way communication is particularly difficult for non-English speaking families because of a variety of language-related barriers.

## Competency #7 – Connecting to Community (p. 30)

1. Participants expressed disappointment when educators do not seem to know what is going on in their communities and in their home lives.
2. Participants believe that more and better connections to the local community and to each child’s home environment would lead to better school relationships with students and families.

## Recommendations

While our focus group interviews demonstrated consensus among participants on many important themes, we wish to emphasize that they represent the views of only a narrow slice of the Commonwealth’s parents. Our findings are thus preliminary in nature. By pinpointing some of the challenges Massachusetts families face in collaborating with their children’s schools, we hope these interviews will help inform the Commission’s deliberations as it considers future recommendations to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and/or to the General Court. We offer the following preliminary suggestions, based on what we learned from listening to the parents, students and providers who were kind enough to give of their time and participate in our interviews.

* 1. **We hope the parent-serving organizations represented on the Commission will have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on this memo.** We endorse the suggestion in the Commission’s draft work plan to share this memorandum with Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC) and the Parent Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) to obtain their feedback and input on our findings and on the issue of collaboration with families more broadly. We agree with the proposed timeline that these organizations be provided the opportunity to weigh in by May 2017.
  2. **While we hope our findings can ground and guide the Commission’s thinking about future recommendations, further inquiry about the issue of collaboration with families seems necessary.** There are many groups of parents and students we did not have the time or resources to reach in this initial round of focus group interviews. Should the Commission determine that it would be useful to conduct further interviews, we would endorse this decision. We invite the Commission to make use of our protocols and we would be happy to assist it in conducting further focus groups.
  3. **We recommend the Commission consider weaving these findings, including particularly some of the suggested best practices mentioned by participants, into the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework.** To the extent the best practices noted by our interviewees are not already reflected in the Framework content under the “Collaboration with Families” element, we would recommend that the workgroup(s) focusing on revision of the Framework consider doing so, and we would be happy to help with this work.

Competency #1

# Building Relationships

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Building relationships” means creating and fostering a school atmosphere where families, and caregivers in particular, feel welcome and valued at their child’s school and where educators and caregivers trust each other. Schools can promote such an atmosphere by focusing on the following actions:

* 1. **Maintaining a welcoming physical environment** (e.g., friendly signs welcoming visitors and explaining how to get around the building; standards for welcoming behavior that apply to all staff; friendly front office staff; comfortable family resource room, including space where parents can meet; etc.);
  2. **Creating programs and activities to engage families in improving student achievement** (e.g., student work is displayed throughout the building; programs help families understand what their children are learning; the school shows families how to help children at home and responds to what parents want to know about; the school reports to parents about student progress);
  3. **Encouraging and supporting strong relationships between teachers and caregivers** (e.g., the school uses a “joining process” to welcome families, give tours, and introduce staff and families to each other; frequent opportunities for educators and caregivers to meet face-to-face; personal contact with each family at least once a month; family liaison helps educators connect to families);
  4. **Developing families’ self-confidence and power** (e.g., involve families in planning how they would like to be involved; groups like the PTO reflect diversity of the community; easy to meet with the principal and other staff; parents develop school improvement projects and conduct action research); and
  5. **Providing professional development for families and staff** (e.g., families learn how the school system works and how to advocate for their child; teachers learn effective approaches for working with diverse families; families and staff have opportunities to learn together; the school draws in community resources) (Mapp 75-78).

Building trusting relationships is important because parents have repeatedly indicated that feeling welcome and being treated with respect by school staff is the number one key to their connection with a school. (Mapp 47) Indeed, “when school staff construct caring and trustful relationships with parents, treating parents as partners in their children’s education, parents are far more likely to become involved—and stay involved.” (Mapp 47) To this end, Karen Mapp has developed what she calls a three-part “joining process,” growing out of research conducted at the (then-named) O’Hearn School in Boston, where the school community 1) welcomes parents into the school; 2) honors their participation; and 3) connects with parents through a focus on the children and their learning. (Mapp 48-9) According to her,

“[w]elcoming, honoring, and connecting with families creates a school community in which everyone says they feel like ‘members of a family.’ Parents respond to this culture by becoming loyal members of the school community, and by taking part in their children’s education in ways they had never envisioned.” (Mapp 50).

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

While parents desire frequent communication from schools, most of our participants expressed frustration that families tend to hear from schools primarily when things go wrong or in times of crisis. Some participants shared that caregivers often report feeling intimidated or uncomfortable when they enter their child’s school, a problem that is especially prevalent among marginalized communities. Many participants conveyed that caregivers often do not have relationships with their child’s teacher, but rather connect to other staff in the school. Often parents choose to relate to the person in the building who puts them at ease, regardless of that individual’s position. By and large, according to what we heard, elementary schools seem do a better job of building relationships with caregivers than do middle and high schools.

* 1. **Parents desire more frequent, consistent communication from schools regarding their children.** There was a general consensus that the lines of communication between parents and schools stand to be opened further. The parents, students, and providers we heard from were in agreement that parents wish to be informed about their children’s progress at school at regular intervals throughout the school year. In particular, parents would like to hear of their child’s progress and or standing in the classroom *prior* to receiving a report card or other similarly formalistic, infrequent forms of communication.

*What participants said…*

* + - “The report card tells me my child is failing in reading and math. But what does that exactly mean? My kid can read and loves math, so what is he struggling with exactly? He needs extra help, but on what? A formal report card or warning doesn’t supply that information. More regular communication would make this problem a lot easier to handle.” – Boston Parent
    - “My principal just started a mandatory system where teachers have to email parents how the child is doing; my parents really like being kept in the loop.” – Boston High School Student
    - “At my school they let parents know about things too late; it should be expressed earlier in the school year to keep the rapport good. By the end of the school year there is no time to reflect or adapt to the review.” – Boston High School Student
  1. **Many parents feel that their child’s school only communicates with them when there are exceptional circumstances or in times of crisis.** While parents, students, and providers all identified parents’ desire to have more frequent communication with their children’s schools, all groups reported that communication tends to occur primarily when “things have reached a tipping point.” As a result, the relationship

between parent and school suffers: parents feel exasperated because it seems as though it is too late to meaningfully intervene; others disengage from their child’s school because they are only contacted when things have gone wrong; and, on the whole, parents come to view the school in a negative light. Some participants indicated that parents are contacted when things are going exceptionally well in the classroom, but this response was less frequent.

*What participants said …*

* “We are only reaching out to parents during crisis. If we stayed on top of things when they were ‘good,’ we would see much different results. We should be having ongoing conversations.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “I get a lot of avoidance from parents when it comes to dealing with schools because when they get a phone call from their child’s school, it is never good news. It would be great if sometimes those calls home were a positive experience for parents.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “There is very little parent engagement at my school. It seems like the school doesn’t care. My parents only hear when there’s something bad – never good stuff, not even good grades or when I speak at a ceremony.” – Boston High School Student
* “At school they only talk to your parents when things are going really good or really bad. The students in the middle get lost.” – Boston High School Student
* “We all know every family has problems, and a lot of parents would like the call about discussing the progress of their students. Schools focus too much on the negative and not the positive. It would be rewarding for students to hear positives as well.” – Massachusetts Provider
  1. **Middle and high schools communicate less frequently with families than do elementary schools.** While parents, students, and providers expressed dissatisfaction with communication-levels on the whole, they largely agreed that elementary schools do a much better job of engaging parents than do upper-level schools. Indeed, groups agreed that middle and high schools provided fewer organized opportunities for parents to visit the school and made fewer attempts to engage individual parents.

*What participants said …*

* “At my high school, open house is not even advertised anymore. It was a big deal in middle school. Now, 95% of families don’t even know about it. My school has never spoken to my mom and I was someone who got in a lot of trouble my freshman and sophomore year” – Boston High School Student
* “In elementary school your parent is always involved. As you go to middle school, they are somewhat involved. But in high school, teachers are not quick to involve parents because they think in college you won’t be with parents so you might as well get used to it now.” – Boston High School Student
* “When kids hit junior high, schools don’t want parents in there. The resistance you get from the school centers on confidentiality and safety issues. The school

puts up barriers that prevent people from coming in to help that don’t make sense.” – Massachusetts Provider

* 1. **Many parents feel intimidated by their children’s schools.** Parents who reach out and communicate with school staff often confront feelings of anxiety and discomfort. In the special education setting, parents often lack knowledge of their rights and reported a power asymmetry present in their interactions with schools. Some parents feel compelled to say “yes” to any school suggestion relating to their child’s educational needs. Some parents have also reported to their providers feeling as though they themselves were in trouble when interacting with school staff.

*What participants said …*

* “Families don’t feel like they have the power to say no. They feel like everything the school says, they have to say yes to.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Parents feel like the school is more powerful than they are. Schools will call parents in when there is a problem and tell them what to do. Schools even push medication [for a child] on parents. Parents feel bullied and belittled.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Parents can see schools like DCF or court, and they don’t know how to engage. Sometimes they feel threatened.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Sometimes foster parents feel more welcome than biological parents [at IEP meetings] because the latter are blamed. Also it can depend on the disability . . . if it’s emotional based, then there’s a lot of blame on biological parents.” – Massachusetts provider
  1. **Parents that do form strong relationships with school staff do so with individuals who make them feel comfortable; to facilitate this, participants advocated for involving parents in more informal, relational settings.** Parents that reported a relationship with the school described a representative of the school that made them feel at ease, regardless of whether a particular issue fell within that staff member’s line of work. Accordingly, participants recommended a relational approach and emphasized engaging parents in low-stress settings.

*What participants said …*

* “Most of the parents we work with interact with the school on a relational level. They speak to the person they have a relationship with. So some of the issues that should be brought to the administrator are being brought to the teacher’s aide or the after school instructor.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Schools need to put someone out there as a liaison that can give people the information they need to contact the school. If schools could put someone out there to do outreach on a personal level –someone to say here’s my name, my contact information, let’s find a way to work together–the relationship between schools and parents would improve.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Here’s what would be most beneficial [to improve the school-parent

relationship]: parents want to see what children are doing besides just letter grades like As and Bs; we need more events in general that are not open houses. We need to invite parents, for example, to plays and recitals. This would build an actual sense of community.” – Boston High School Student

* 1. **Many immigrant and non-English-speaking parents do not feel welcomed or supported by schools.** Some schools can be unaccommodating of non-native English speaking parents. Written and verbal translation services are often not available. This lack of accommodation leaves many families feeling left out of their children’s education.

*What participants said …*

* “Parents feel overwhelmed because schools throw information at them that is not translated. We find out from families after sitting down with them that they’re going to meetings for their child at schools with no translator present. We try to get them to understand that you have a right to ask for a translator, but they don’t feel like they can ask that.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “Disenfranchised families feel unsupported. I was at an IEP recently with awhite family who got everything they asked for. With my immigrant families it is so different; everything is a struggle.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “A lot of times schools don’t take time to learn about the culture in the home. This makes families feel unwelcome and prevents them from visiting the school.”

– Massachusetts Provider

* 1. **Many parents do not feel they have a strong relationship with their child’s teacher.** All three groups reported that some teachers view their role as largely limited to “academics” and the classroom setting and often do not reach out to engage parents directly. Multiple participants acknowledged that this seems to be because educators have so many burdens on their plates. As a result, the lack of direct communication from the teacher can make it difficult for families to obtain individualized information about their child’s learning and to communicate with educators about non-academic issues.

*What participants said …*

* “If a teacher thinks a child is misbehaving and continues to do so, the teacher will just hand it off to the guidance counselor. Teachers just wash their hands clean of the situation.” – Massachusetts Provider
* “The only time parents have time to talk with the teacher is when you’re there to pick up your child from school because the teachers are waiting outside. But that’s it. And even then you don’t even have that much time.” – Massachusetts Parent
* “Teachers have a lot of demands. But it really hurts the family when a teacher can’t be empathetic any more. In one case I had, a teacher did not take the time to understand the detrimental role that a mother’s mental illness was playing with

regard to the mom’s actions towards her child’s education.” – Massachusetts Provider

* 1. **Teachers have significant constraints on their time and schools experience general resource constraints; increased support staff at schools could help with this problem and improve family engagement.** Participants speculated that the lack of parent engagement and communication about individual children’s needs are likely attributable to time and resource constraints. Providers advocated for increased support staff – such as a family liaison or additional counselors – at schools to improve the school–parent relationship.

*What participants said …*

* [District] used to have a parent facilitator, this was a very helpful position – it was sometimes part time and sometimes full time. – Massachusetts Provider
* [District] has wraparound coordinators in schools that really help with family engagement – these are good but it is hard to keep the position funded. – Massachusetts Provider
* “Teachers are expected to be psychiatrists and psychologists in addition to being teachers. We need mental health professionals or a reimagining of the schools.” – Massachusetts Provider
* **“**If more clinical support were present, then you wouldn’t have the situation where schools had no idea that a kid was struggling. We need to step back and realize there can’t just be one clinical person for five hundred kids. Every single kid could use clinical support in some way.” – Massachusetts Provider

Competency #2

# Linking to Learning

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Linking to learning” is when schools facilitate and encourage the involvement of families in their child’s learning both at home and at school. Research shows that engaging families in their children’s learning has a positive impact on student achievement. (Mapp 81) Outcomes for children are best “when families receive the parenting supports that they need to support their children’s learning.” (Grant 48)

This competency moves beyond traditional Parent-Teacher Associations, socials, or other general entertainment or information-gathering events. It instead focuses on activities, meetings, and events aimed at helping families: (1) get a clear idea of what their children are learning and doing in class; (2) promote high standards for student work; (3) gain skills to help their children at home; (4) understand what good teaching looks like; and (5) discuss how to improve student progress. Linking to learning is particularly important for marginalized communities because often “parents did not get a good education in their country or here, but want their children to do well in school. They’re just as hungry for education as their kids are.” (Mapp 85)

In order to foster linking to learning, studies show that caregivers need tools and information to assist in their child’s learning. “To help their kids at home, parents need to know what’s going on at school. For example, teachers often complain that parents don’t bother to check their children’s homework. But parents have told us, ‘We didn’t know we were supposed to check homework. Tell us how to do it and what to look for. Explain what the teacher wants.’” (Mapp 81) In addition to homework, schools can support parents to promote academics at home by teaching the importance of discussing the school day; involving parents in setting learning goals; developing authentic home extension activities that are interactive for both families and students; and keeping families aware of the content of classroom instruction and ways to help their child. (Grant 54) Examples of linking to learning activities include reading workshops and family math nights, home learning packets and Saturday academies, and parent- run study centers and career portfolio nights. (Mapp 81)

To summarize, this competency means that “[b]y recognizing families and communities as children’s first and most influential teachers, [schools] can collaborate effectively with them to support … students’ learning and development through home-learning activities.” (Grant 304).

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

Our participants reported that many schools do not provide the tools families need to be able to engage effectively with their child in his or her academics. While elementary schools more typically invite the parents into the classroom, this happens much less frequently in the higher grades. Participants shared that, at all grade levels, many school do not give parents a clear role in the school, making it harder to assist in their child’s learning.

* 1. **Caregivers want more opportunities to communicate directly with teachers about what and how their child is learning.** Many schools do a great job of having parent-teacher nights and other singular events; some participants told us about creative appreciation dinners and other celebratory events. However, many

participants expressed that families are rarely invited into the school beyond “open house” nights (which are sometimes not widely advertised even where they do occur). Rather, information about children’s learning is often sent home with students, typically in their backpacks. This system is not effective for informing the teacher whether a caregiver actually receives the message, even when a signature is required.

*What participants said …*

* “The main form of communication is the backpack. The belief is that that will be sufficient. There will be the one opportunity at parent-teacher night, but that backpack system is relied upon heavily.” – Massachusetts provider
* “A form is sent out, but this is just a list of classes. This is the only communication, unless a parent goes to an IEP meeting, where there’s more discussion.” – Massachusetts provider
* “Some parents haven’t even been receiving progress reports . . . We just sat down with a family with report card but no progress report. The student had D minus in two classes, had trauma and real emotional disabilities. No note, no communication.” – Massachusetts provider
* There are some good models of engagement. One district held an appreciation dinner where they gave out awards to the students, and parents came to the event that the school usually wouldn’t see. And one district has recently increased family engagement events by having parent report nights and welcoming caregivers to see students make presentations. – Massachusetts provider
  1. **Elementary schools are more likely to involve caregivers in their child’s learning; in the higher grades, a focus on student responsibility and autonomy seems to make schools more reluctant to involve parents.** Having multiple teachers in higher grades and (often) a rotating schedule also make it more difficult for parents to connect directly with teachers, because parents are not sure where to direct their questions or concerns. Despite the tendency to gradually reduce caregiver involvement in student learning, perhaps consistent with developmental expectations, students somewhat surprisingly indicated they would like to see the school continue to involve their parents actively in their education in order not to fracture their home and school life and so that they could continue to turn to their parents as a source of support.

*What participants said …*

* “In elementary your parent is always involved. As you go to middle school, somewhat involved. But in high school they don’t like communicating with school as much, they feel as if you’re nearing college and so the timing just isn’t right. And teachers feel the same way; they are not quick to involve parents because they think at college you won’t be with parents so might as well get used to it now.” – Massachusetts student
* “Some of the high school kids I work with, there’s an effort to help increase the kid’s independence. There’s this natural progression to not looping in the parents

as much. But the kids dealing with depression, anxiety, trauma, these are real barriers to the kids taking on this responsibility.” – Massachusetts provider

* “I feel like parent engagement is extremely important. I go to school for 6 hours but the rest of the time I’m with my mom. Whoever is your guardian has a huge impact on your life. If you make parent-school teacher relationship seem less important, it will push students out as well. If my mom doesn’t care, why should I care? You crave approbation from your parents. If you push parents out, it will push students too.” – Massachusetts student
* “I’m very focused about what I want to do with my life. But others aren’t the same way. For me [parent engagement] can reinforce focus and attention during class and for others inspire them to want to make something of themselves. It becomes a household topic. ‘How’s Mr. X doing?’ is a valuable conversation to have.” – Massachusetts student
* “We struggle with how to look at the block schedule. Kids can get it down, but parents are lost. Kids are living it, becomes routine. This is a barrier to parent involvement, you can’t even tell where the kids are or who to speak with.” – Massachusetts provider
  1. **Caregivers would like to be given clear expectations for the role schools want them to play in their child’s education.** One barrier to family engagement is a lack of understanding on what the role of the caregiver is in education, especially among immigrant and uneducated families, and particularly as children get older. Schools should explain to parents how they can be involved and tell them explicitly what is expected of them.

*What participants said …*

* “Parents should be given a supportive role. Parents can help if student is struggling in a class.” – Massachusetts student
* “My school had an information night for Congolese families about the school system. All schools could do this for different communities and reach more disenfranchised cultures/communities.” – Massachusetts provider
* “Drawing parents in is still important in high school. The environment is different from middle school, and parents need to be informed about what is different, why it is harder, and what they can do to help.” – Massachusetts student
  1. **Caregivers need informational tools to help their child with his or her learning.** The way in which children are educated changes generation to generation, and caregivers do not always understand how what is expected of their child is different from when they were in school. This lack of knowledge can impede caregivers from assisting in their child’s homework or in studying for an exam and can prevent the child from seeing the caregiver as a resource. Further, multiple participants expressed the difficulties caregivers face helping their child with schoolwork when they cannot understand the work or the instructions due to a language barrier.

*What participants said …*

* “Kids don’t even go home with books. Math is taught in different ways now and homework is not accepted unless it is done in a certain way. The parent has no book to try and help. The parent has no shot. And when they do ask teachers for sample problems, teachers are non-responsive.” – Massachusetts provider
* “A lot of times they assume that parents are educated enough to answer the questions. Even since we were in school, they’ve changed how math is taught. I’ve talked to parents with no significant barriers who tell me ‘I don’t know how to teach them math.’ There’s no breakdown to parents of ‘this is how we’re teaching it,’ no resource to help parents teach their kids.” – Massachusetts provider
* “I’m always amazed when I hear from schools that kids aren’t doing their homework, when I know that no one else in the family speaks English.” – Massachusetts provider
  1. **Sometimes the school’s efforts at engagement do not consider the needs of working families.** Many participants reported caregiver’s desire to attend school events but noted that these events are often scheduled during times when they work thereby preventing them from attending or receiving information. Flexible scheduling and wider availability of personnel would facilitate parents’ participation in important school events.

*What participants said …*

* “Teachers get certain parents, but not all parents. You get the same parents all the time. But the parents you need to get to, the teacher never sees. These parents are often working three jobs. The parent sees their job as providing food and the teacher's job to educate, and those two lines don’t meet.” – Massachusetts provider
* “As a parent, the way the school tries to engage me, they have a reading session. So child can read to parent and vice versa, but it’s at the school and at 9am when a lot of parents are going to work.” – Massachusetts parent
* “In elementary school your parents plan their schedule around being your parents. But over time the parents start to think more about paying for college tuition and start putting more on their plate. Maybe having an open house at 4pm is not good because work time, and maybe 8pm is not good either because parents are tired. So these ideas are good but it’s hard for parents to really participate when trying to take on tasks. Maybe there are other ways like the Skype idea; it’s not too hard to do that while on break at work, for example. [Lack of involvement] could be deeper than just parents not wanting to check on you.” – Massachusetts student

Competency #3

# Addressing Differences

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Addressing differences” entails schools appreciating, and being prepared for, various forms of diversity among students and their families, including differences of culture, race, language, income, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, occupation, class, culture, and nationality. (Mapp 129) This appreciation and preparation is essential to effective family engagement and involves both systematically learning about differences that exist and guarding against pre-existing assumptions tied to various identities and characteristics. Shedding such assumptions is imperative; establishing respectful relationships with families necessitates first probing one’s own biases and attitudes. (Grant 140)

Cultural differences, in particular, can play a substantial role in shaping student and family experiences. (Grant 137) Useful strategies for culturally responsive family engagement must tie in both classroom and school-wide policies (Grant 150) and include recognizing, learning about, and affirming all cultures in the school; connecting families’ cultures to what students are learning; working with community members and groups to connect families and the school; recognizing and supporting different forms of parental involvement; supporting learning at home; and addressing language barriers. (Mapp 161).

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

We discovered that many families feel their schools do not adequately address cultural and linguistic differences among students, sometimes employing strategies that are ineffectual or even counterproductive. Participants identified several practices, however, such as increasing staffing diversity, translation services, and actively guarding against stereotyping, that they think would be particularly helpful.

* 1. **Caregivers would like to see their cultures reflected in the diversity of staff at the school, as well as in school events and programming.** Participants suggested several improvements regarding cultural appreciation, including expanded opportunities for students and families to showcase their culture through clubs, activities, and performances; cultural liaisons tasked with helping to better incorporate minority populations into the school community; better cultural sensitivity training; and more diverse hiring. Ultimately, caregivers expressed a desire to feel understood by the school.

*What participants said …*

* + - “Training is important, but staffing diversity is crucial as well. Parents and students can be put off, for example, by being the only person of color in a room.”

— Massachusetts Provider

* + - “Staff should reflect the community they serve—we have mostly Caucasian teachers even though most of the students are Latino.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “More cultural parties and celebrations can help, and also just being more friendly and open-minded.” — Massachusetts Providers
  1. **Some caregivers perceive that they are treated differently because of cultural stereotypes held by school personnel.** Participants shared that families who do not feel their culture is valued are often less inclined to engage with the classroom teacher and the broader school community.

*What participants said …*

* “Unfortunately, we sometimes see a complete disregard of family background when schools interact with families. Or preconceived cultural stereotypes improperly color the way schools interact with certain students and their families”

— Massachusetts Provider

* “We see some stereotyping of certain behaviors from certain groups – for example, if you assume the Burmese father drinks because of a cultural stereotype, then it doesn’t matter if you serve Burmese food at the cultural event, the families are going to feel judged and not come.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “Black families often feel as if they are treated more aggressively due to stereotypes against them.” — Massachusetts Provider
  1. **Many parents experience significant language barriers in their attempts to communicate with their child’s school, but some schools have found ways to overcome these barriers.** Sometimes these barriers are complete, as illustrated by an instance shared by one participant in which a school hung up on a parent who had called but could only speak Spanish. In other instances, schools make an effort to address language barriers, but their efforts are ineffective. For example, some schools make up for inadequate translation services by relying on students or technology. Other schools only provide translation support for Spanish speaking families. Finally, in some schools, ESL programming isolates non-English speaking students from the rest of their peers. Some effective practices schools use to overcome language barriers include translating all notices into the language of the home and training parents to help translate for each other.

*What participants said …*

* “Immigrant parents feel so out of touch—they do not understand how the system here works. We need a better way to communicate with these parents. Translation alone is not always enough.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “The foreign students, especially if taking ESL, can be isolated where they are all together and the American students are separately all together.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “Even useful technology like Google Translate can help to some extent, but substantial meaning is lost in a word-by-word translation.” — Massachusetts Student
* “Potluck day really makes me mad. They contact all of your parents and say, ‘come in and bring a dish’. How can parents come and be involved if they can’t speak English well and you do not accommodate for that?” — Massachusetts Student
* “One school has a norm of only sending home notices once they have already been translated into other languages. This is a very good thing.” — Massachusetts Student
* “The more verbal translators, the better. One possibility is training a cohort of parents to serve in this translator role.” — Massachusetts Provider
  1. **Parents in small towns shared a unique barrier in relating to school staff: being excluded or treated differently because of their family’s intergenerational reputation in a community where everyone knows everyone else.** The insular nature of some of our rural communities makes it very difficult for some parents to overcome past negative reputations of their families. Families that are newcomers to these communities can struggle to integrate into the school because they are treated as outsiders that no one knows.

*What participants said …*

* “A family can have a bad reputation from something that happened 20 years ago with another child in the family. School will treat every other kid in that family as a problem. Teachers do that all the time. Schools have said ‘good luck to you’ when they hear that I am working with a particular family who has a bad reputation.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “In smaller areas, many families knows each other, which can create a stigma around accessing support.”— Massachusetts Provider
* “The ‘bad’ family label can attach just based on the neighborhood in which a student lives.” — Massachusetts Provider

Competency #4

# Supporting Advocacy

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Supporting advocacy” means involving parents and caregivers in decisions about how their child is educated. Schools can promote this competency by collaborating with families to monitor their child’s progress, by giving parents a voice in their child’s course placement or school program, and by involving families in goal setting for their child. (Mapp 153-54)

Supporting caregiver advocacy is important because, as research has shown, when parents feel they have the power to positively influence their child’s future, their child tends to do better in school. (Mapp 155) Furthermore, parents possess expertise about their child stemming from the intimate knowledge they have of their child and the community in which they live. (Senge 521) Because of their expertise, parents often understand the barriers that keep their child from learning and may have insights about how to address these issues. (Senge 521-22) Schools can tap into this expertise by supporting parent advocacy. As Mapp explains, “It’s in the school’s interest to work with families in this way. Think how much easier it would be for educators if every child had an effective advocate.” (Mapp 153)

The literature suggests that to foster parent and caregiver advocacy, schools should provide information to parents about how the school works, including what programs or classes are available to students, who or what determines a child’s placement in those classes and programs, the chain of command at the school, and where or to whom a parent may go with concerns. (Mapp 162-69) Additionally, schools ought to consult with families in developing goals for their children, and provide updates to families about their child’s progress in meeting those goals. (Mapp 169).

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

Parents, students, and providers described school’s efforts to support parent advocacy as minimal. Parents are asked for their input when the school is legally required to ask--such as at IEP and 504 plan meetings; otherwise, schools typically do not ask for parent input about their child’s education. Because schools do not often solicit parents’ input about their children, the burden is on parents to be proactive to affect change. Schools would benefit from initiating contact with parents and soliciting all parents input about their child’s education because parents often have insight into their child’s way of learning that school personnel lack.

* 1. **At IEP meetings, caregivers appreciate the presence of an outside provider.** Parents and providers agreed that caregivers benefit from the presence of an outside provider during meetings at school. They told us that the presence of a provider increases parents’ feelings of security and confidence, making it easier to have a voice. Additionally, many parents feel that school personnel are more respectful of the opinions of providers than they are of their opinions.

*What participants said …*

* “You also have a lot of parents that have anxiety around going to school because they themselves perhaps had bad experiences at schools.” – Massachusetts provider
* “As a provider, I am respected and treated like I know what I’m doing. As a parent, though, they act like I know nothing” – Massachusetts provider
* “ I had a client, a mom who had 10 kids . . . She knew what she wanted. She gave us credit but all she really needed was for us to sit next to her. Parents feel empowered by us.” – Massachusetts provider
* “I have seen IEP meetings where advocates are involved and those where they are not—huge difference. When an advocate is there the school is more uptight, making sure t’s are crossed. They are more lax when it is just parents, and are not that worried whether it’s to the letter of the law, just trying to move it forward and get the parent to say yes. Parents usually just agree with what the school says.” – Massachusetts provider
  1. **Caregivers and students would like educators to actively solicit parent input about their child’s education.** Parents and students described feeling that schools do not solicit information from parents about how their child learns. Instead, the burden is on parents to seek information and effect changes in their child’s education.

*What participants said ….*

* “This new AP course we have, what they expected from students was insane and some could do it and some couldn't; parents and headmasters had to be involved to tailor the lesson in a way where all learn as opposed to only some. I feel like it’s not brought into the light until you bring it up.” – Massachusetts student
* “[I] wish the teacher would be more forthright. I don’t know if it’s because my daughter is 12 and they have so many kids, but I wish teachers felt more invested, and [that] it’s urgent to keep the parents involved as opposed to waiting for them to figure it out.” – Massachusetts parent
* “I know someone who has child who is severely autistic. She said that she had to invest and learn all these things by herself; the school wasn't really helping her with a pathway and information. She had to take that initiative herself.” – Massachusetts provider
* “There is a guidance counselor in [my school district] who is knocking on the doors of parents who don’t regularly show up to stuff. And I know that not everyone has the time for that. But we need people to take the time to get parents engaged. We need someone that will call 5-7 times, and make it such that the parent finally says ‘Yes, I’ll come in.’” – Massachusetts provider
* “[Schools should] offer education to all parents about what their child’s rights are and specific to various disabilities and so they can understand.” – Massachusetts provider
* “In order for it to be a collaborative process, you need to put extreme pressure on schools systems. Schools do not naturally go there. The family assuming the role

as the expert is almost unheard of. A family voice is not incorporated unless a family’s voice is very loud.” – Massachusetts provider

* 1. **Parents are very knowledgeable about their child’s learning style and would like to be asked how their children learn best.** To benefit from parents’ valuable insight, it is helpful when educators first build trust so that parents are at ease discussing their child’s education with school personnel. A good way of soliciting families’ opinions about their child is by asking simple questions like, “Tell me about your kid” or “What do you love about your child?”

*What participants said…*

* “I know my child’s learning style, needs to be hands on and involved. He can’t just sit in class and be lectured, he will be annoyed. He won’t raise his hand if he doesn’t understand. Teachers need to go up to him and initiate; otherwise, he will be embarrassed. We know our children better than anyone. If he is frustrated . . . he’ll shut down. He has even been sent to principal, but just needed someone to ask ‘what about the problem do you not understand?’ . . . Everyone has a different learning style.” – Massachusetts parent
* “Teachers tell me about my preschool kid. And I am like I know more about my kid than you do. I want the teacher to know more about my kid, but the level of introspection and questioning . . . is just not there. The conference is the teacher telling me . . . and not asking me anything at all about my kid.” – Massachusetts parent
* “My son was not put in art class because they worried he wouldn’t get along with students well. He’s in special ed. But he loves painting and he does it with his pen. They shut him down because of his behaviors.” – Massachusetts family partner
  1. **Caregivers would find it helpful for schools to be mindful of their schedules and language barriers when creating structures for their input in students’ learning.** Many focus group participants raised concerns about school scheduling of parent conferences. When soliciting family input, it is crucial for schools to accommodate families with busy schedules and to be mindful of working parents. Additionally, participants described schools as being unmindful of language barriers during meetings and conferences.

*What participants said…*

* “Conferences are not mandatory, but they are offered. The times at which they’re offered depends on the district. It’s definitely a barrier to parents attending when it’s during work hours” – Massachusetts provider
* “That goes back to the language problem. So either we make English available to families or we have to do something else. There are creative ways where schools can go to communities and work organically with them to get parents to come in, but many schools aren’t doing that.” – Massachusetts provider
* “They often don’t have translators at IEP meetings.” – Massachusetts provider

Competency #5

# Sharing Power

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Sharing power” means involving families in decision-making about how their child’s school is run, in addition to involving them in decisions about their own child’s education. It means that schools provide mechanisms for parents and families to take part in decision making and governance. (Grant & Ray 54) One way schools share power is by building a strong and diverse parent organization and by providing opportunities for all parents to voice their concerns to their representatives. (Mapp 188-89) Schools can train parent leaders to serve as representatives for a broad base of families by gathering their recommendations, voicing those concerns, and relaying information back to families. (Grant & Ray 54)

Research has shown that student academic achievement is linked with sharing power. For instance, Designs for Change, a community organization in Chicago, studied improved reading achievement and effective local school councils in Chicago schools. The study defined effective local school councils as those in which parents:

* + Are involved in selecting and evaluating a principal
  + Develop and monitor the school improvement plan
  + Promote improved academic programs
  + Collaborate with the community

The study showed that schools with effective local school councils were significantly more likely to have improved reading achievement. (Mapp 190) Similarly, a study conducted by the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University demonstrated links between sharing power and upgraded school facilities, improved school leadership and staffing, high-quality learning programs for students, and new funding for afterschool programs. (Mapp 211)

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

In our focus groups, we heard common themes from parents, providers, and students on the subject of sharing power. Parents, providers, and students acknowledged that schools generally have parent councils but typically felt that these councils are not highly influential.

Additionally, we heard from many respondents that the parents who do have a small say in school governance questions are often a group that is not representative of the school population. Parents, providers, and students agree that sharing power is important, and recommended that schools improve awareness about and increase the diversity of parent councils.

1. **Most parents do not have a say in school-based decision-making.** Parents, students, and providers described feeling that parents are powerless to affect real change at their children’s schools. While many schools have parent councils, most parents are uninvolved in these groups. Finally, many parents and students perceive that even the parents who are involved do not have a genuine voice in school-based decision-making. Instead, they are told what the school is doing and asked to help.

*What participants said…*

* + “As far as school boards go, the only real voice you have is if you run for office.”

– Massachusetts provider

* + “The parents don’t have much of a say in what happens at the school, you’re told what’s happening and maybe invited to help in it but can’t actually change things.” – Massachusetts student
  + “There are PTOs and PTGs and PAC. But this stuff isn’t taken too seriously.” – Massachusetts family partner

1. **Caregivers want to be involved in groups like parent councils but experience barriers to participating.** Through the focus groups, we learned that many parents are not able to attend parent council meetings. Some reasons include: 1) parents feel the councils are “cliquish,” and that outsiders are not welcome; 2) parents, especially in more rural areas and smaller towns, lack transportation needed to attend meetings;

3) parents work during meeting times; and 4) parents prefer to use their time and energy toward their individual child’s education rather than toward systemic or governance issues.

*What participants said…*

* + “Problem is the board becomes a popularity contest. Or even assistance with field trips and other stuff like that. The parents that were chosen are very well liked in that community. I wanted to bridge that gap but I couldn’t because I am not popular.” – Massachusetts family partner
  + “At my daughter’s school they have a school site council where they have elections at beginning of school year and representatives. But the time is Tuesday at 3pm, so working parents have no chance to attend.” – Massachusetts parent
  + “People in poverty don’t often work from 9-5 and they have transportation issues. We don’t really have public transportation here after 5 or 6 and it runs every hour. You’ll wait an hour for taxi.” – Massachusetts family partner
  + “Like I’m involved with girl scouts because my daughter is involved there, so that’s the best use of my time.” – Massachusetts parent

1. **Parent leaders are not representative of the school population.** Parents, providers, and students described feeling that parent councils are unrepresentative. The councils tend to consist of white, wealthier parents. Some parents and students noted that non- English speaking families and immigrant families are unrepresented. Additionally, parents who have children with learning differences or mental health issues often feel unwanted in these spaces. Because the councils are not representative of the school community, some parents feel that the council does not or should not speak for them.

*What participants said…*

* + “[The council is made up of] stay at home moms, white women. They definitely don’t reflect the audience at all. It looks like the mean girls pack—like a cheerleader squad. They have 50 Pandora bracelets.” – Massachusetts provider
  + “We have a citywide council and also school site councils. But it’s mostly composed of those who are native speakers. . . Most of these immigrant parents are not being involved.” – Massachusetts student
  + “That’s what deterred me; when they are talking about parent councilors, they didn’t feel like they fit the criteria to be in the positions they were, and it ruined my feelings about it. [I] didn’t want to be around those people. I’m not listening to that parent!” – Massachusetts parent
  + “There’s no effort to recruit parents from diverse bgs, parents with different experiences in parenting, onto these councils. It’s typically one parent from a two parent household. – Massachusetts provider

1. **Parent council involvement varies depending upon the type of school.** Participants shared that there is more parent involvement in parent councils at high performing schools than at low performing schools. Likewise, there is a variation in parent involvement in parent councils at elementary, middle, and high schools, with involvement declining in the higher grades.

*What participants said…*

* + “[Parents have] no decision-making at two middle schools, they don't send anything out. I go to every last meeting at Kindergarten. They gave a background of every person that was running.” – Massachusetts parent
  + “But at my school, wouldn’t be surprised if not a single parent on the school site council. My parent has no idea what this is. No type of information being given out, at all.” – Massachusetts student from “Level 4 School”
  + “If you have passionate parents with the time to take out for their kids, that’s the difference between middle school and high school. By high school, they are busy worrying about getting funds for your college. They will go to your recital at middle school, but at high school they expect you to be engaging in self- advocacy.” – Massachusetts student

1. **Parents, providers, and students suggested that schools raise awareness about council meetings by improving communication and access to families.** Ideas for improving attendance at council meetings included announcing parent council meetings at school events rather than by sending home flyers, as well as scheduling meetings with working parents in mind. For instance, evening meetings are preferable to afternoon meetings. Finally, schools should consider providing transportation options to families.

*What participants said…*

* + “We should advocate for parents that are not as dedicated in involvement, we should look for more dedicated parents to involve. Reaching out to such people, and I think these people are effective and have good input to give and they have good perspective.” – Massachusetts student
  + “[At one school], they have different staff members go up on the stage at these meetings, probably leads to better outcomes than just flyers which just get tossed.

But if you’re already in the building, the school can tap into that resource.” – Massachusetts parent

* + “Usually for the school-staffed family nights a huge number of parents show up. If there [was a] way to tap into families coming into those [family nights], it would be great. But if they have flyers for other meetings no one shows up. Now with [my child’s school]. family nights, science nights school is packed. But when parent-led, no.” – Massachusetts parent

Competency #6

# Two-Way Communication

* 1. *What the Experts Say*

“Two-way communication” is reciprocal and means that schools and families “equally share information, ask questions, and express opinions.” (Grant 313) Research shows that communication is most effective when schools provide information about school programs and update families on student progress regularly. (Grant 54)

“It is important that school personnel have the necessary skills and knowledge to build collaborative, trusting relationships with families. A key factor in building such relationships is strong communication with families that is ‘frequent, personal, and consistent.’” (Grant 309)

There are several means by which schools can achieve this level of open and reciprocal communication with families, including telephone and virtual conferences, home visits, and community and workplace conferences. (Grant 322-25) “Whether it is an informal discussion with a father before school when he drops his child off at the door, or a formal scheduled conference with all family members, there are communication strategies that a teacher can use to help create a positive exchange of information.” (Grant 315)

One important means of two-way communication is recognizing the diversity of languages within the school family by ensuring that schools have the means by which to communicate across languages. (Grant 314) At least one expert suggests that schools recognize that communicating across languages may also include communicating across cultures. (Grant

330) “Research has shown that expressive language is culturally coded, or highly influenced by cultural socialization. … Misunderstandings about terms or phrases, limited command of English, and differing communication styles make communication with families from other cultures or language backgrounds challenging for a teacher.” (Grant 330) Research recommends that translators are present at all meetings with parents and finds that it is especially important during IEP meetings. “Because of the language barriers, many times these conferences end up as one-way communication sessions with the teacher disseminating all the information.” (Grant 331)

“When families and educators keep lines of communication open and are comfortable in sharing thoughts and feelings, the ultimate winner is the student, who will benefit from the strong relationship between home and school.” (Grant 335)

* 1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

As articulated above, many participants shared that families only receive communication from school when their child is in crisis. This can lead to forming a combative relationship with the schools, and the caregiver can start to dread or ignore phone calls from the school. Caregivers want to hear when their child is doing well in addition to when their child is having troubles.

Overall, caregivers want an increase in communications received from the school distributed in accessible and reliable mediums. Additionally, caregivers would like schools to provide translators more consistently and not rely on students to translate.

* + 1. **Caregivers find it helpful when schools have a dedicated person to assist in communicating with them.** Many focus group participants expressed concern with

the amount of pressure being placed on teachers and suggested having a dedicated school official responsible for facilitating communication with families.

*What participants said…*

* “Create a middleman, such as a guidance counselor, as third party to help facilitate discussions and involve the family.”
  + 1. **Using technology to communicate with caregivers can be helpful, but only if they are supported to access the technology and it is available on the devices they typically use.** Participants shared that schools are increasingly moving resources and communication online. While generally this is a good thing, it can also have the effect of excluding or putting a spotlight on families without access to the web. Most schools now provide updates to caregivers via an online portal; however, many participants indicated that these portals are not updated regularly with the tendency being that educators only update around the time of report card release. Participants overwhelmingly preferred the use of technology readily available on a cellphone, and this can help schools reach families who are otherwise absent due to work or other time consuming situations. Texting can also help teachers reach caregivers who do not speak English because of the availability of tools such as Google translate.

*What participants said…*

* “It’s not even a matter of language or being poor. We have grandparents that are raising young children and the expectation is that they go on to the online portal. And grandparents are so confused. And kids in trouble are not going to sit down and show grandma how to use the portal when they’re in trouble.”
* “In those portals, half the teachers use them, half the teachers don’t use them. So they’re not particularly effectively. And then you have a parent that doesn’t have a computer, or the skills to manipulate the site. And it’s not bilingual.”
* “Technology (Skype, Facetime, Google Hangout) are effective tools for working parents. Teachers can reach parents on their break.”
  + 1. **Two-way communication is particularly difficult for non-English speaking families because of a variety of language-related barriers**. Participants expressed a strong desire for the availability of more verbal translators to help in their communications with the school. Bilingual students reported that administrators repeatedly call students out of class to translate for a family who does not speak English putting the child in an awkward position. Bilingual students who have been asked to translate also reported that they do not always translate negative messages to the families hoping to help the student in trouble. While written information is regularly given out in Spanish and English in most schools, participants expressed that other language groups (such as those who speak Portuguese or Haitian Creole) are often excluded because of a lack of translation services for written notices and communication.

*What participants said…*

* “If Brazilian child is struggling and needs clinical support, no one in guidance speaks Portuguese so you need to use roundabout way to connect with child’s family.”
* “It would be good to have a cohort of parent leaders who are trained to translate.”
* “At my school, if they need a translator they look around for a student who can speak that language. They have no specific system in place; they just go from classroom to classroom. Sometimes they just have a list of students they call for.”
* “One time I was pulled out of my classroom to translate for a parent but I am not a good translator. I think separately in the two languages. I was very slow and it didn’t work. They couldn’t get a teacher for that because the two Spanish speaking teachers were busy.”
* “The Somali community in Boston is small and so I would probably know a student’s mother if she was visiting school that day. Sometimes in translation I try to sand the edges a bit. I find it really useful to do that; I would understand what the issue is but if I just directly say it, it would be received poorly. Direct translation is lost on both sides. Someone in between both of them is needed.”
* “That form only comes back in English or Spanish. So if you don’t read either of those, you’re out of luck.”
* “Notices are sent home in Portuguese. Norm that the school established is that these things only go home if they are already translated into Portuguese. It is a very good thing.”

Competency #7

# Connecting to Community

1. *What the Experts Say*

“Connecting to community” is when schools take the initiative to discover what is going on in the surrounding community and what is on community members’ minds, including the families of students. This discovery allows for more responsive student and family engagement, and can build trust necessary to create productive family-school bonds. (Mapp 215) Methods for connecting to community include suggestion boxes in the school and in community sites, interactive online chat groups and blogs, requesting time on community-access cable TV stations, holding informal discussions at sites in the community, and collaborating with organizing groups to elicit the ideas and concerns of families and community members in a listening campaign or neighborhood walk. (Mapp 215)

Other ways of engaging the community involve supporting local merchants, employing neighborhood residents, connecting with key community stakeholders (Grant 397) and creating well-planned community service programs for students. (Mapp 223) Unfortunately, too often schools see themselves as isolated institutional entities apart from surrounding communities. (Senge 585) This can lead to isolation and independence, as opposed to interdependence (Grant 398), in turn leading to negligible school contribution to those communities, and considerably less buy-in from community members, including students’ families.

1. *What We Heard in Massachusetts*

Many families feel disconnected from the schools their children attend, as educators and staff often do not live in the community the school serves and do not make enough of an effort to learn about what is going on, either in the community or in each child’s home situation. There is wide agreement that more community engagement on behalf of schools would lead to more responsive teaching, more trusting students and families, and therefore better family-student bonds.

* 1. **Participants expressed disappointment when educators do not seem to know what is going on in their communities and in their home lives.** When this connection is not present, students can feel reticent about creating substantive, personal bonds with teachers. Also, a lack of connection can mean that school events held for parents do not reflect the realities of the communities in which they live, resulting in lower attendance and less engagement. Additionally, the less teachers and schools know about a given family’s home environment—and any hardships or struggles that may exist therein—the less they are able to serve and support families.

*What participants said…*

* + - “A lot of my teachers live far away. Recently a student was struck by a train, and many teachers didn’t even know for a few days until other students started talking about it more.” — Massachusetts Student
* “Our family spent time at a shelter, and I was disappointed that teachers did not know or care or incorporate this into how they treated my child. It is important to know what’s going on in the background at home.” — Massachusetts Parent
* “A school not being connected to the larger community or the child prevents students from having open dialogue or communicating their trauma.” — Massachusetts Provider
* “Students bring what happens in their communities into the classroom. Students go through a lot of things, like death of a friend, and students will not want to share that information with someone they do not have a personal relationship with.” — Massachusetts Student
  1. **Participants believe that more and better connections to the local community and to each child’s home environment would lead to better school relationships with students and families.** This engagement can occur through schools taking the initiative to be more involved with activities in the local community, hiring personnel from the community the school serves, having regular conversations with students about what is going on in their community, and keeping in close touch with families throughout the year and learning about new conditions in their home environment.

*What participants said…*

* “Teachers and schools should check in with students when something happens in the community and incorporate this into what the school is doing inside and outside the classroom.” — Massachusetts Student
* “When we lived in a shelter for a while, the teachers at my child’s charter school were informed and very involved. This made a huge difference in my child’s learning because they were supportive and would reach out to us regularly.” — Massachusetts Parent
* “The more teachers know about different home environments and issues, whether relating to drug abuse, addiction, or something else, the better.” — Massachusetts Parent

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# Appendix A

## Parent Interview Protocol

1. **Building Relationships** - ‘welcoming, trust, feeling valued’

Transition sentence: *During our conversation today, we are going to ask you a couple of different categories of questions based upon factors that we have learned are important in caregiver-school relationships. One thing that we have learned is that it is important for caregivers and families to feel welcome and valued at their child’s school, so we are going to ask a few questions about your experience at your child’s (or children's) school.*

* 1. Main question: How do you feel when you walk into your child’s school building?

*Type of question -- Feeling. Goal is to create a list of adjectives to know what emotions being at the school inspires in the caregivers, to know how they connect with the school.*

Optional probes:

* + 1. What makes you feel that way?
    2. What would make you feel differently?
    3. When was the last time you visited the school?
       1. What was your purpose in visiting the school?
       2. What was your experience in visiting?
       3. Who did you speak with?
       4. How did you feel?
    4. Can you describe the atmosphere?
    5. What does the school physically look like?
  1. Main question: Which adults in the school do you have contact with?

*Type of question -- Experience. Goal is to know whether caregivers feel comfortable approaching school personnel and if they feel as though they’re be listened to or taken seriously if they do, whether they trust the school enough to approach personnel*

Optional probes:

* + 1. How would you characterize these interactions?
    2. What is your opinion of that person?
       1. What makes you feel that way?
    3. Who starts the conversation?
    4. In what situations do you talk with that person? (i.e. casual conversations, only speak with someone when there is a problem)
    5. What is the role of the school in your life?
  1. Main Question: What could make your relationship with school personnel better?

1. **Linking to Learning** - ‘knowledge of academic requirements, connection to home activities’

Transition sentence: *Another thing that we have learned is that it is important for schools to involve caregivers in their child’s learning, so we are going to ask a few questions about how the school makes it possible for you to get involved.*

* 1. Main question: How does the school involve you in your child’s learning?

*Type of question -- Experience. Goal is learn whether caregivers feel empowered to actively participate in their child’s learning because the school involves them in the classroom.*

Optional probes:

* + 1. How do you find out what your child is learning in the classroom?
    2. How do you keep track of your child’s homework?
    3. What tools or information does the school provide you that empower you to assist in your child’s learning?
    4. How does the school give you updates on your child’s academic performance?
       1. How often do you receive updates?
       2. What kinds of updates do you receive?
  1. Main Question: What more could the school do to make you feel involved in your child’s learning?

*Type of question -- Opinion. Goal is to learn caregivers’ suggestions for what schools could do more effectively.*

Optional probe:

* + 1. How would you like to be involved?

1. **Addressing Differences** - ‘respect for culture, language’

Transition sentence: *It is also important that schools welcome and respect all families so we are going to ask a few questions related to how your school recognizes and appreciates all communities.*

*Type of questions -- Feeling. Goal is to know in what ways, if at all, educators have allowed a family’s diversity to create a barrier to their meaningful participation with the school, to know how caregivers experience their family’s diversity in the school.*

* 1. Main question: How, if at all, has your family’s background impacted the way the school treats you?

Optional probes:

* + 1. By family background, we mean family structure, immigration status, or any other unchangeable characteristic about your family …
    2. If silence, give example of personal experience.
    3. How has that affected you?
       1. How has it characterized your interactions with the school?
       2. When, if ever, have you felt excluded because of your background?
    4. How could the school improve?
  1. Main question: How, if at all, does the school value your culture or community?

Optional probes:

* + 1. What (else) could the school do?
    2. How do assignments work to include or exclude your family’s culture or community?
    3. How do events work to include or exclude your family’s culture or community?

1. **Supporting Advocacy** - ‘given a voice, involved in goal setting’

Transition sentence: *It is important that schools involve caregivers in decisions about how their child is educated, so we are going to ask you some questions about how your child’s school involves you in decisions about your child’s education.*

*Type of questions -- Experience. Goal is to know how schools involve caregivers in decisions regarding how their child is educated.*

* 1. Main question: In what ways does the school give you a voice in decisions involving how they teach your child?

Optional probes:

* + 1. How does the school take advantage of your experience with / knowledge of your child?
    2. When does the school ask for your opinion?
    3. Who do you approach when there is a problem?
  1. Main Question: How could the parents’ voice be made more effective?

1. **Sharing Power** - ‘incorporated in school’s governance, caregiver/community involvement’

Transition sentence: *In addition to the importance of caregiver involvement in decisions about their children’s education, caregiver involvement in decision-making about how the school is run is also important, so we are going to ask some questions about how your child’s school shares decision making power.*

* 1. Main question: How are caregivers given a say in how the school is run?

*Type of question -- Knowledge. Goal is to know what caregivers know about how the school is run and how decisions are made.*

Optional probe:

* + 1. How would you describe the families that tend to be involved in that structure?

1. [**Two-Way**] **Communication** - ‘free flow of information between the caregiver and school’

Transition sentence: *Good communication between schools and caregivers is another important factor that we have learned about, so we will ask a few questions about school communication.*

*Type of questions -- Experience. Goal is to know how caregivers & school officials communicate with each other*

* 1. Main question: In addition to what you already shared, what other ways does your child’s school communicate with you?

Optional probes:

* + 1. By communication, we mean letters, phone calls, home visits.
    2. How frequent are those communications?
  1. Main question: What kinds of translation services are available at the school for families who do not speak English fluently?
  2. Main question: How could the school improve communication?

1. **Connecting to Community –** ‘situating the school in the larger community’

Transition sentence: *Finally, it is important that schools appreciate their role in the larger community around them and appreciate the impact that the community has on the environment of the school and students’ ability to learn, so we will end by asking a few questions about your school’s role in your community.*

*Type of question -- Values. Goal is to know whether schools appreciate their role in the larger community around them and appreciate the impact that that community has on the environment of the school/students’ ability to learn.*

* 1. Main question: How well does the school know what’s going on in the community in which you live?

Optional probe:

* + 1. What are the benefits or consequences to schools (not) doing it?
  1. Main question: How would you like to see the school connecting with your community?

1. **Final Summative Question -** If you could change anything about your child’s school, what would it be?

# Appendix B

## Student Interview Protocol

1. **Building Relationships** - ‘welcoming, trust, feeling valued’

Transition sentence: *During our conversation today, we are going to ask you a couple of different categories of questions about how schools can create good relationships with families. Our first set of questions is about families feeling welcome and valued at your schools.*

* 1. Main Question: How does your family feel about visiting your school?

Optional probes:

* + 1. What makes them feel that way?
    2. What would make them feel differently?
    3. When was the last time your caregiver visited your school?
       1. What was the purpose of the visit?
       2. How often does your caregiver visit?
       3. Why all do they visit?
    4. Describe the atmosphere of your school.
  1. Main Question: Which adults in the school does your family have contact with?

Optional probes:

1. How do those interactions typically go?
2. What is the relationship between your caregiver and that adult like?
3. Who starts the conversation?
4. Why do they typically talk?
   1. Main Question: What could the school do to make the relationship with your caregiver better?
5. **Linking to learning** - ‘knowledge of academic requirements, connect to home acts’

Transition Sentence: *Next we want to talk about how schools involve your caregiver in your learning. So we are going to ask a few questions about how the school makes it possible for your caregiver to get involved.*

* 1. Main Question: How does the school involve your family in your learning?

Optional probes:

1. How do your caregivers find out what you are learning in school?
2. How does your caregiver keep track of your homework?
3. What tools or information does the school provide that helps your caregiver assist you in your learning?
4. How does the school update your caregivers about About your academic performance - whether good or bad?
   1. How often does your family receive updates?
   2. What kinds of updates does your family receive?
   3. Main Question: What more could the school do to involve your parent?

Optional probe:

i). How would you like to see your parent involved?

1. **Addressing Differences** - ‘respect for culture, language’

Transition Sentence: *It is also important that schools welcome and respect all families so we are going to ask a few questions related to how your school recognizes and appreciates all communities.*

1. Main Question: How, if at all, has your family’s background impacted the way the school treats your?

Optional probes:

* 1. By family background, we mean family structure, immigration status, or any other unchangeable characteristic about your family …
  2. If silence, give example of personal experience.
  3. How has that affected your family?
     1. How has that affected you?
     2. How has that affected your caregiver’s ability to participate in your school?
     3. When, if ever, have your felt as though your family’s been excluded because of your background?
  4. How could the school improve?
     1. What could the school change to make itself more inclusive?

1. Main Question: How, if at all, does the school value your culture or community?

Optional probes:

1. What (else) could the school do?
2. How do assignments work to include or exclude your family’s culture or community?
3. How do events work to include or exclude your family’s culture or community?
4. **Supporting Advocacy** - ‘given a voice, involved in goal setting’

Transition Sentence: *It is important that schools involve caregivers in decisions about how you are educated, so we are going to ask you some questions about how this happens.*

* 1. Main Question: What role does your family play in the school’s decision about how best to teach you?

Optional Probes:

1. How does the school take advantage of your caregivers’ experience raising you?
2. When does the school ask for your caregiver’s opinion?
3. Who do they approach when there is a problem that they feel could impact your learning?
4. **Sharing Power** - ‘incorporated in school’s governance, caregiver/community involvement’

Transition Sentence: *In addition to the importance of caregiver involvement in decisions about their children’s education, caregiver involvement in decision-making about how the school is run is also important, so we are going to ask some questions about how your child’s school shares decision making power.*

* 1. Main Question: How are your families given a say in how the school is run?

Optional probe:

i.) What types are families tend to be involved in that structure?

1. [**Two-Way**] **Communication** - ‘free flow of information between caregiver and school’

Transition Sentence: *Good communication between schools and caregivers is another important factor that we have learned about, so we will ask a few questions about school communication.*

* 1. Main Question: In addition to what you already shared, what other ways does your school communicate with your family?

Optional probes:

1. By communication, we mean letters, phone calls, home visits.
2. How frequent are those communications?
   1. Main question: What kind of translation services are available at the school for families who do not speak English fluently?
   2. Main Question: How could the school improve communication?
3. **Connecting to Community** - ‘situating the school in the larger community’

Transition Sentence: *Finally, it is important that schools appreciate their role in the larger community around them and appreciate the impact that the community has on the environment of the school and on your ability to learn, so we will end by asking a few questions about your school’s role in your community.*

* 1. Main Question: How well does the school know what’s going on in the community in which you live?

Optional probe:

i). What are the benefits or consequences to schools (not) doing it?

* 1. Main Question: How would you like to see the school connecting with your community?

1. **Final Summative Question --** If you could change anything about how your school interacts with your family, what would it be?

# Appendix C

## Provider Interview Protocol

1. **Building Relationships** - ‘welcoming, trust, feeling valued’

Transition sentence: *During our conversation today, we are going to ask you a couple of different categories of questions based upon factors that we have learned are important in caregiver-school relationships. One thing that we have learned is that it is important for caregivers and families to feel welcome and valued at their child’s school, so we are going to ask a few questions about what caregivers’ experiences are like at the child’s school.*

* 1. Main Question: How do caregivers typically experience their role in the school?

Optional probes:

* + 1. How often do you find that caregivers visit the schools on their own initiative?
       1. Why do you think this is?
    2. How do schools function to make the caregiver a part of the school community?
  1. Main Question: Which adult(s) do caregivers usually have contact with at their child’s school?

Optional probes:

* + 1. How would you characterize these interactions?
    2. Who initiates the conversation?
    3. Under what circumstances do those conversations usually happen? (i.e. casual conversations, disciplinary)
    4. How do caregivers prioritize the school?
  1. Main Question: What could make this relationship better?

1. **Linking to Learning** - ‘knowledge of academic requirements, connection to home activities’

Transition sentence: *Another thing that we have learned is that it is important for schools to involve caregivers in their child’s learning., so we are going to ask a few questions about how schools make it possible for caregivers to be involved.*

* 1. Main Question: How do schools involve caregivers in their child’s learning?

Optional probes:

* + 1. How are caregivers informed about what their child learns in the classroom?
    2. Who informs caregivers about their child’s homework assignments?
    3. How, if at all, do schools equip families with the tools necessary to help caregivers assist their child’s learning? What could be better?
    4. How does the school give the family updates on each child’s academic performance?
       1. How often do caregivers receive updates?
       2. What kinds of updates are caregivers receiving?
    5. What more could the school do to make caregivers feel include in their child’s learning?

1. **Addressing Differences** - ‘respect for culture, language’

Transition sentence: *It is also important that schools welcome and respect all families so we are going to ask a few questions related to how schools recognize and appreciate all communities.*

* 1. Main Question: How, if at all, do schools allow a family’s background to impact the way in which it treats the caregiver?

Optional probes:

* + 1. By family background, we mean family structure, immigration status, or any other unchangeable characteristic of your family…
    2. If silence, give example of personal experience.
    3. How does the school’s behavior affect the caregiver?
       1. How does it flavor their interaction with the school?
       2. How does it make them feel?
  1. Main Question: How, if it all, does the school value its families’ culture or community?

Optional probes:

* + 1. What (else) could the school do?
    2. How do assignments or events work to include or exclude families’ culture of community?

1. **Supporting Advocacy** - ‘given a voice, involved in goal setting’

Transition sentence: *It is important that schools involve caregivers in decisions about how their child is educated, so we are going to ask you some questions about how schools involve caregivers in decisions about their child’s education.*

* 1. Main Question: In what ways do schools give caregivers a voice in decisions involving how the child is taught?

Optional probes:

* + 1. How does the school take advantage of families’ experience with/ knowledge of their children?
    2. When do schools ask for the caregiver’s opinion?
    3. Who do or can caregivers approach when there is a problem?
  1. Main Question: How could the caregiver’s voice be made more effective?

1. **Sharing Power** - ‘incorporated in school’s governance, caregiver/community involvement’

Transition sentence: *In addition to the importance of caregiver involvement in decisions about their children’s education, caregiver involvement in decision-making about how the school is run is also important, so we are going to ask some questions about how schools share decision making power.*

* 1. Main Question: How are caregivers given a voice in how the school is run?

Optional probe:

* + 1. How would you describe the families that tend to be involved in that structure?

1. [**Two-Way**] **Communication** ‘free flow of information between the caregiver and school’

Transition sentence: *Good communication between schools and caregivers is another important factor that we have learned about, so we will ask a few questions about school communication.*

* 1. Main Question: In addition to what you already shared, what other ways do schools communicate with families?

Optional probes:

* + 1. By communication, we mean letters, phone calls, home visits.
    2. How frequent are those communication?
  1. Main Question: What type of translation services are available at schools for families that do not speak English fluently?
  2. Main Question: How could the school improve communication?

1. **Connecting to Community** - ‘situating the school in the larger community’

Transition sentence: *Finally, it is important that schools appreciate their role in the larger community around them and appreciate the impact that the community has on the*

*environment of the school and students’ ability to learn, so we will end by asking a few questions about school’s role in the community.*

* 1. Main Question: How well do schools know what’s going on in the communities in which their students live?

Optional probe:

* + 1. What are the benefits or consequences to schools not doing it?
  1. Main Question: How would you like to see educators connect with the community?

1. **Final Summative Question --** What practices at the schools you serve could other schools emulate?