

BEYOND CARING

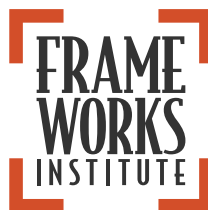
Mapping the Gaps between Expert, Public, Practitioner, and Policymaker Understandings of Family, School, and Community Engagement

A FrameWorks Map the Gaps Report

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Introduction

Everyone is part of a family. We're all members of communities. We all have experience with schools. And because these institutions are a prominent part of our collective experience, our national culture includes deep and well-established ways of thinking about them, and about relationships between them. Education practitioners and policymakers engage with these institutions in their professional role and, in turn, their professional cultures include specific ways of thinking about them.

This means that advocates in the field of family, school, and community engagement are working in well-tilled soil. As a result, some ideas about engagement are easy to plant and grow. The basic idea that schools need to engage with families, for example, is largely accepted, because members of the public believe that parents are primarily responsible for children's outcomes, including academic outcomes. Advocates therefore don't have to convince anyone that engagement is important. Yet some ideas about engagement are harder to cultivate. For example, members of the public frequently assume that communication between teachers and parents should happen during set times in the school year or only in specific circumstances, like during parent-teacher conferences or when their child is doing poorly in school. They have trouble recognizing the value of more proactive, sustained and regular engagement. And all three groups—the public, practitioners, and policymakers—tend to think of places exclusively in terms of the people who inhabit them and identify good engagement with a specific feature of individuals: whether or not they care. This allows people to see the importance of relationships between people but obscures how engagement must be institutionalized in schools and communities in order to ensure equity and the academic achievement of *all* students.

Understanding the terrain of public, practitioner, and policymaker thinking about family, school, and community engagement is, thus, critical for advocates. By understanding how these groups think about engagement, advocates can be more effective communicators and can better move forward their agenda. In this report, we present findings from research sponsored by the Heising-Simons Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation, and the National Association of Family, School, and Community Engagement, which charts public, practitioner, and policymaker understandings of the issue, and examines how these ways of thinking differ from experts'. By comparing these perspectives, we are able to map the gaps that advocates must address to foster a deeper understanding of engagement between families, schools and communities and how best to achieve it.

Communicating effectively about family, school, and community engagement first requires a clear sense of the core ideas that all parties need to understand about it. The report begins with a distillation of this “untranslated story” of family, school, and community engagement. This untranslated story represents the content to be communicated to the public, practitioners, and policymakers with a reframing strategy. It reflects the field’s understanding of what family, school, and community engagement *is*; what factors facilitate or obstruct it; what the benefits of engagement are; how productive engagement between family, schools, and communities can be fostered; and the type of policies that should be adopted to support it.

We then describe the cultural models¹—the common but implicit patterns of thinking and assumptions—that structure how members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers reason about engagement. Drawing on 30 semi-structured, long-form interviews, we identify the different ways of thinking about engagement that are available to these three groups. Some of these ways of thinking are productive, and can be used to communicate key ideas, while others are unproductive, making it more difficult for these groups to grasp key features of engagement.

Finally, we map the gaps between the expert perspective and public, practitioner, and policymaker perspectives, examining where these understandings overlap and where they diverge. The report concludes with a set of preliminary framing recommendations drawn from the implications of the cultural models and map the gaps findings.

A description of the research methods used and participant demographic information can be found in the Appendix.

The Untranslated Expert Story of Family, School, and Community Engagement

This section presents a distillation of the themes that emerged from analysis of 13 interviews with experts on family, school, and community engagement. Taken together, these themes constitute the ‘untranslated story’ of family, school, and community engagement—the core set of understandings that those working in this field want to be able to communicate about this issue to the public and key stakeholders. The untranslated story is organized around five questions:

1. What is family, school, and community engagement?
2. What factors facilitate or obstruct engagement?
3. What are the benefits of engagement?
4. How can productive engagement be fostered?
5. What should be done to support engagement?

WHAT IS FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Family, school, and community engagement encompasses all the ways that adults interact to support children’s development, academic achievement, and long-term success. Experts used an expansive definition of engagement that encompasses the varied ways in which the adults in a child’s life—from parents and teachers to coaches and even the clerk at the neighborhood corner store—interact with the child and with each other to support that child’s development and achievement. This includes interactions and learning opportunities

that are not explicitly directed by, or connected, to school but still promote children's academic success, such as parents reading to their children during early childhood, child participation in afterschool community-based activities, and service learning opportunities in communities.

Family, school, and community engagement centers on the ways that schools initiate and sustain positive, ongoing relationships with families and community organizations. Although experts began with a broad definition of engagement, in practice they understood engagement as school-led. Experts noted that early childhood centers and schools play a key role in initiating engagement. Schools need to be welcoming and invite families and community organizations to collaborate with teachers and school leaders to establish and realize learning and developmental goals for children. Education practitioners need to help parents become co-teachers and advocates for their children. And schools must reach out to community organizations to build effective partnerships and leverage trust to assist in children's learning and development. Once these relationships are established and expectations are set, engagement becomes multidirectional and less school-led, as families and communities begin to initiate and actively pursue engagement with schools in order to improve student achievement.

Engagement should be relational, intentional, goal-oriented, and continuous. Experts emphasized that engagement should be based on strong and equal relationships among education practitioners, parents, and community organizations. These relationships need to be intentionally built around shared goals for children, and communication needs to be continuous, happening throughout the year and not just when problems arise. Experts emphasized that engagement should begin in early childhood and continue throughout children's school careers, although the forms of engagement may vary depending on age, grade level, and stage of development.

Engagement must involve recognition of the positive contributions of everyone involved in children's lives and be responsive to cultural differences. A critical starting point for engagement, according to experts, is the recognition that families and communities make strong positive contributions to children's development and academic achievement. Experts noted that all parents want their children to succeed and are their children's first teachers. Parents have a wealth of knowledge about their children that education practitioners can draw on. Similarly, all communities have resources that schools can benefit from, and these interactions are opportunities to build trust and establish ongoing partnerships. Engagement should also be culturally responsive—meaning it should be attuned to the experiences, expectations, and values of different racial/ethnic groups—in order to match the needs and priorities of parents and communities.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT?

Family, school, and community engagement improves academic achievement and promotes children’s healthy development. Experts noted that the most immediate measurable effects of engagement are improved student attendance and graduation rates. Engagement also leads to higher academic achievement and college attendance. In addition, engagement leads to better attitudes towards school and better student behavior in school. Experts also argued that parental engagement from early childhood through 12th grade supports healthy social and emotional development, as parents model positive relationships with educators and children see their parents’ commitment to their education. Healthy social-emotional development promotes better academic outcomes and ultimately leads to more socially aware and civically engaged citizens. In addition, engagement between families, schools, and communities enhances student achievement by connecting in-school and out-of-school learning opportunities so that the lessons students receive in school are reinforced out of school.

Engagement supports successful parenting and strengthens families’ connections to their communities. According to experts, when parents collaborate with early childhood centers and schools on goals for their children’s development and academic achievement, they feel empowered to help their children succeed and to advocate for their children and themselves. Engagement also builds parents’ social capital as they interact with a wider network of people—both educators and other parents. Engagement can also connect parents to community resources that further support families’ wellbeing.

Engagement improves school climate, teacher satisfaction and retention, and school performance. Experts explained that engagement has strong positive effects on school climate and teacher performance. Engagement increases teacher satisfaction and retention and, because students have better attitudes towards schooling, there are fewer behavioral problems and teachers know that they can rely on parents to reinforce lessons at home. Improvements in academic achievement can also lead to improved test scores and better school rankings.

Engagement strengthens communities. Engagement strengthens communities by building a sense of interdependence and civic connectedness among families, schools, and the communities schools serve. Engagement also strengthens communities by creating a better educated and more civic-minded citizenry.

Engagement can advance equity. When teachers and school leaders are actively engaged with families and communities, it helps them address their own biases, recognize the assets families and communities bring to children’s education, and incorporate culturally-relevant practices into teaching and programs. It is important to recognize, however, that engagement efforts do not automatically advance equity. To improve equity, engagement needs to be well organized and intentional, and include all families, regardless of circumstances or barriers to communication and relationship-building.

WHAT FACTORS FACILITATE OR OBSTRUCT ENGAGEMENT?

Institutional factors make engagement more or less likely. Experts often suggested that it is schools' and districts' responsibility to make family, school, and community engagement possible and to successfully sustain engagement efforts. They talked about the importance of schools being “welcoming”—that is, recognizing the assets and resources families and communities bring to children's education, and encouraging parents and community organizations to visit schools, communicate with teachers, principals, and administrators, and collaborate on goals and projects. Effective engagement requires commitment from school and district leaders to institutionalize engagement. While informal engagement is certainly valuable, without formal programs and policies to promote engagement it is difficult to sustain engagement. Educational leaders can facilitate engagement by implementing evidence-based engagement programs and policies, and modeling and setting expectations for effective engagement practices. In addition, teachers need to be trained to implement and use effective engagement practices. Experts emphasized the importance of schools intentionally planning and organizing engagement activities and opportunities.

Cultural factors can facilitate or obstruct engagement. Many experts noted that social class and race/ethnicity mediate relationships between families and schools. There may be implicit biases on the part of both families and schools, and educators may feel ill-equipped to interact with parents from different cultural backgrounds, both of which interfere with productive engagement. In addition, parents may have had experiences in their own schooling that create barriers to engagement. This may be particularly true for parents of color who experienced discrimination in school, and for immigrants who have different cultural expectations about family-school relationships.

Family and community circumstances can facilitate or obstruct engagement. Parents' employment circumstances—the number of hours they work and the flexibility of their schedules—influence the extent to which they can actively engage with schools, meaning schools have to develop different ways to engage busy families. In addition, the neighborhoods and communities where schools and/or students are located mediate engagement. Schools in rural communities or charter schools may have students who travel long distances to and from school, making it more difficult for parents to engage in person. Schools in high-crime neighborhoods may find it more difficult to be welcoming to parents and community members. And some communities have local organizations that are strong advocates for schools and offer multiple opportunities for school-community partnerships, while others have few such organizations.

HOW CAN PRODUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT BE FOSTERED?

Ensure that engagement is age-appropriate and developmentally sensitive.

Although family, school, and community engagement is important from early childhood through high school, experts suggested that engagement should be sensitive to children's age and level of development. For instance, in early childhood, engagement should center on collaborating in ways that facilitate children learning language and social skills. In elementary school, parents are a source of information about their child's strengths and needs, and can be engaged as advocates for resources, volunteers in classrooms, and homework helpers. In the teenage years, parents can be engaged in cultivating autonomy and helping children learn how to navigate choices.

Initiate engagement during early childhood. Experts explained that early childhood programs can establish parent engagement in education and help set shared educational expectations with families before children reach primary school. This prepares parents to take an active role in their children's education and sets the stage for multidirectional engagement between families and schools. Experts also noted that pre-kindergarten programs and K-12 schools can, and should, develop strategic partnerships to ensure continuity around engagement across settings.

Initiate engagement early in the school year. Many experts emphasized the importance of practitioners and parents meeting at the beginning of the school year (or earlier) to discuss children's strengths and needs, inaugurate teachers' knowledge of each student and their learning style, and to agree on goals for their children/students. These early interactions establish school-family relationships and collaboratively set expectations for their respective roles in helping children achieve their goals.

Ensure that communication between schools and families is consistent, proactive, responsive, and inclusive throughout the year. Experts stressed that communication between parents and schools needs to be consistent throughout the year and not occur only during open houses or semi-annual parent-teacher meetings, or when a child is experiencing an academic or behavioral problem. Instead, interactions should be regular and reliable; be responsive and respectful of each other's questions and concerns; and include data about individual students, as well as information about how to improve student learning that is comprehensible and actionable for parents. Many experts suggested that all materials should be translated for non-English-speaking parents, and a few suggested surveying parents at the beginning of the year to determine their preferred method of communication.

Create community asset maps. Many experts suggested that schools create "asset maps" so they better understand the communities where they are located. School leaders can construct these maps by visiting local businesses and working with community organizations to identify resources—like social service and healthcare providers—that might be useful to students, their families, and

schools. Creating a community asset map is not only a way of identifying community resources, but also a way to build relationships with potential community partners.

Partner with community organizations to coordinate in-school and out-of-school learning. Experts noted that schools and community organizations that provide out-of-school learning activities—such as libraries, community centers, and afterschool programs—can, and should, coordinate to create more seamless transitions between schools and out-of-school settings, and to bridge learning that happens across settings.

WHAT POLICIES SHOULD BE ADOPTED TO SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT?

Include training in engagement in teacher preparatory and professional development programs. Experts agreed that practitioners need to be trained in culturally responsive family engagement. This is particularly critical in pre-service teacher preparation, when practitioners define their professional goals and acquire their foundational skills and techniques. Experts also emphasized that, while it is valuable to have administrators at the school and district levels who specialize in family and community engagement, all practitioners should be expected to understand and use strong engagement practices, and engagement should be part of teacher and principal evaluations. Some experts recommended expanding engagement training to include everyone who works with children, such as daycare providers, coaches, and afterschool providers.

Make practitioner home visits standard for all families. Many experts cited Evidence-Based Home Visiting programs as models for strong family-school engagement that should be implemented more broadly. Experts cited home visits as a method of establishing strong communication from the outset, and as a way to help teachers understand their students' individual circumstances and potential challenges. A few experts suggested these home visits begin during early childhood.

Incorporate requirements for engagement into School Improvement Plans. Some experts recommended making engagement an explicit part of School Improvement Plans. They suggested that plans should require that appropriate data be collected, so engagement efforts can be properly evaluated and practitioners and schools held accountable for effectively engaging families and communities. This would also help schools comply with the engagement requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Establish community schools. Several experts argued that community schools are particularly successful models of family, school, and community engagement. Community schools are intentionally designed to be the center of their communities and to provide essential social services to families and

community members, in addition to public education for children. These schools become the “hub” of the community, providing students and their families with links to critical resources such as healthcare, job training, and housing assistance, as well as a location where educators and parents can interact and build trust and communication.

- **Create state-level engagement frameworks.** Several experts noted that many states are creating family, school, and community engagement frameworks for public schools. They applauded these efforts and suggested that state superintendents and administrators need to set clear expectations for engagement and provide support for efforts at the district and school levels.
- **Use the Head Start and Dual Capacity Frameworks as models.** Several experts suggested using the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework, and the Dual Capacity Framework—both of which provide explicit, evidence-based roadmaps for goal-oriented engagement—as models. Experts noted that these are research-based approaches, and that they have shown considerable promise in achieving positive outcomes for children.

THE UNTRANSLATED EXPERT STORY OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

What is family, school, and community engagement?

- Family, school, and community engagement (FSCE) encompasses all the ways that adults interact to support children’s development, academic achievement, and long-term success.
- It centers on the ways that schools initiate and sustain positive, ongoing relationships with families and community organizations.
- Engagement should be relational, intentional, goal-oriented, and continuous.
- It must involve recognition of the positive contributions of everyone involved in children’s lives and be responsive to cultural differences.

How can productive engagement be fostered?

- Ensure that engagement is age-appropriate and developmentally sensitive.
- Initiate engagement during early childhood.
- Initiate engagement early in the school year.
- Ensure that communication between schools and families is consistent, responsive, and inclusive throughout the year.
- Create community asset maps.
- Partner with community organizations to coordinate in-school and out-of-school learning.

What are the benefits of engagement?

- FSCE improves academic achievement and promotes healthy development.
- It supports successful parenting and strengthens families' connections to their communities.
- It improves school climate, teacher satisfaction and retention, and school performance.
- It strengthens communities.
- It can advance equity.

What policies should be adopted to support engagement?

- Include training in engagement in teacher preparatory and professional development programs.
- Make practitioner home visits standard for all families.
- Incorporate requirements for engagement into School Improvement Plans.
- Establish community schools.
- Create state-level frameworks.
- Use the Head Start and Dual Capacity Frameworks as models.

What factors facilitate or obstruct engagement?

- Institutional factors make engagement more or less likely.
- Cultural factors can facilitate or obstruct engagement.
- Family and community circumstances can facilitate or obstruct engagement.

Understanding Engagement

HOW THE PUBLIC, EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS, AND POLICYMAKERS UNDERSTAND FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In this section, we present the cultural models—the shared but implicit understandings, assumptions, and patterns of reasoning—that shape how members of the public, education practitioners, and policymakers think about family, school, and community engagement. These are ways of thinking that are *available* to members of these groups, although different models may be activated at different times. It is important to emphasize at the outset that each of these groups is able to think about family, school, and community engagement in multiple ways. People toggle between these models, thinking with different ones at different times, depending on context and conversational cues. Some models are dominant, and more consistently and predictably shape people's thinking, while others are recessive and play a less prominent role.

The cultural models of the three groups—the general public, practitioners, and policymakers—overlap to a significant degree. This is unsurprising and consistent with what we have found in research on other issues. Because practitioners and policymakers are themselves members of the public and share in the United States' national culture, they draw, in many cases, on the same cultural models as other members of the public. However, these groups have some additional cultural models that derive from their professional cultures. These professional cultures are like an additional layer on top of a shared national culture. In some areas, these professional cultural models offer ways of thinking that these groups draw on in addition to drawing on public cultural models. In other areas, they actually displace public models; in other words, on some issues, practitioners or policymakers no longer think like the public does because they have access to ways of thinking that differ from the public's.

Below, we describe this complex landscape of public, practitioner, and policymaker thinking. Some models are shared by all three groups and used in similar ways by each, and when this is the case, we explicitly note it.

Where practitioners or policymakers have distinctive models drawn from their professional cultures, we specifically identify them as “professional cultural models.”

FOUNDATIONAL CULTURAL MODELS

When members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers think about children’s learning and development and the people in their lives, their thinking is structured by a set of foundational cultural models. These models shape thinking about families, schools, and communities, as well as about engagement between them.

The *Places = People* Cultural Model

Members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers identify the places where children learn with the people who live or work there. The equation of places with people is so strong that when participants were asked about places, they responded by talking instead about the people who inhabit those places.

For example, in response to questions about schools, members of the public talked almost solely about teachers.

Member of the Public: *I would say school is like education. You have teachers, students.*

Researcher: *Start with what school looks like and then tell me what you think it should look like.*

Member of the Public: *What it looks like is a number of students in a very organized fashion paying attention to a leader, teacher.*

Similarly, when asked about communities, members of the public responded by talking about neighbors.

Member of the Public: *Community is my neighbors on my street.*

Member of the Public: *Community is like a neighborhood get together.*

While practitioners and policymakers share the *Places = People* cultural model with the public, they think of additional *types* of people in schools and communities. Practitioners and policymakers identify schools not only with teachers and students but also administrators and paraprofessionals. And in thinking about communities, education practitioners tend to think about *workers*—usually public workers—such as police officers, firefighters, and mail carriers.

Researcher: *When you think of what a community might be, what comes to mind?*

Practitioner: *Other workers, there's the policemen, ambulance, postal workers.*

Practitioner: *It starts at city officials with the mayor. You could also include the school board of the school district. You could include the doctors and the nurses and the policemen and the educators and then you could keep going and people who work at the grocery store or the fast-food restaurants or the janitorial staff. I mean anyone who has a job.*

Researcher: *What do you think of when I say the word community?*

Policymaker: *I particularly think of leadership. Who are the elected officials? Who are the religious leaders in town? Who are the business leaders in town?*

The identification of places with the people in them directs attention away from other features of place. So when people are using the *Places = People* model to think about schools, physical resources, school culture, and the school system remain largely out of view. Similarly, when people use the model to think about communities, the focus on neighbors obscures the *institutions* that structure the activities of the community. In other words, when people draw on this model, the idea that communities act through informal institutional structures and formal community organizations is completely missing from their thinking.

The Caring Lynchpin Cultural Model

In thinking about relationships, members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers all tacitly understood caring as the hallmark of and precondition for successful relationships. According to this model, *caring* about a child—and caring alone—is what makes a good parent, a good teacher, or an engaged community member. In this way of thinking, as long as the adults in children's lives care enough, the children will succeed. Poor parenting and teaching are attributed to a lack of concern—parents don't care enough about their children, or teachers are just there to collect a paycheck.

Member of the Public: *I think a school that does well is one that has a teacher who first of all cares about their students.*

Researcher: *What does a child need to do well?*

Practitioner: *Happy, positive teachers. Nurturing, caring environment.*

Because caring is understood to be a deeply personal and individual—almost innate—characteristic, the *Caring Lynchpin* model makes it difficult for people to see that relationships can be intentionally fostered through well-structured interventions or programs. The assumption is that if people don't care, not much

can be done about it, and since this is seen as the beginning and end of a good relationship, it becomes hard to see how relationships—and, in turn, productive engagement—can be strategically and intentionally cultivated.

The Morals, Manners, and Responsibility Cultural Model

Members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers alike assume that learning basic morals lies at the core of development. Members of all three groups relied on this model, explaining that from an early age, children must be taught right from wrong, and how to treat others. At home, parents are expected to prepare their children to be good people out in the world, while at school teachers must teach morals and manners alongside “the basics” like reading, writing, and math. In interviews, practitioners typically understood their role as teaching and reinforcing the same lessons about being a good person that children must learn from their parents.

Member of the Public: *I think parents need to help their children in social skills, in responsibility – you know, like the example of putting your toys away—and to be their first teachers.*

Practitioner: *My role is to teach them, by the end of the year, to teach them to hold a pencil, to cut, to not only do that but to read a simple book by the end of kindergarten. And to teach them math skills, teach them how to get along, teach them how to become friends with each other, their manners. In a sense we’re kind of a parent too. A teacher is similar to a parent.*

Researcher: *How does learning affect how children do in life, or at school?*

Policymaker: *I’m going to go back to the basics of right and wrong. What’s breaking the law, what’s not breaking the law. What adults expect in life in order to succeed in terms of your behavior, and your speech, and the kinds of things you say, and the things you’re not supposed to be saying. I think that all of that has to be sorted through either in the home or at school so that children know that it’s not okay to curse and scream, and hit, and those kinds of things that children see in some circumstances every day, but that’s not appropriate, and why it’s not appropriate. And, I think that’s part of what we’re trying to do as educators, is to make sure the children are going to be successful in life and in a career, and adults that behave that way aren’t successful in life and a career.*

While members of the public focused on home and school specifically, practitioners and policymakers also viewed the community as a site where children learn and practice manners, morals, and responsibility. The moral education children receive at home and in school is reinforced by interactions within the community.

Practitioner: *What they see in their community is how they see people responding, and how they see things go about in their community also impacts them. And it sheds some light or some ideas around the appropriate ways to do things, or what they perceive as the appropriate ways to respond to things.*

Policymaker: *I think [children] learn values, morals, they learn civic engagement, they learn appropriate ways to act or not act, they learn much of what life is good or bad in their world from those communities. I think communities and families have a huge role together, because all of us only know what we know, and those come out of the communities in which we live and the families to which we were tied by birth or growing up.*

IMPLICATIONS OF FOUNDATIONAL CULTURAL MODELS

1. **The Places = People cultural model obscures how institutions do—or don't—facilitate family, school, and community engagement.**

By focusing attention exclusively on one-on-one interactions between parents, educators, and community members, the model limits the ability of members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers to think about the ways in which engagement can, and should, be embedded in school and community structures and cultures. Communicators will need strategies for backgrounding this dominant and foundational model and for bringing institutions and structures more clearly into view.

2. **The Caring Lynchpin cultural model further reinforces people's tendency to personalize engagement.** By placing personal concern and caring at the core of relationships, the model foregrounds the character of individuals and backgrounds the systemic features that shape parenting, education, and community relationships. In turn, it makes it difficult for the public, practitioners, and policymakers to comprehend the ways in which engagement can be intentionally implemented or enhanced through professional training and formalized through programs or policies. Communicators must be careful not to stress caring and concern too much in talking about engagement, or they will cue this model and make it that much harder for people to think systemically.

- **The Manners, Morals, and Responsibility model helps people see the need for engagement in a limited area.** The fact that both the public and practitioners see parents and teachers as imparting values to children, particularly young children, makes partnership between them seem natural. And for practitioners, the model is particularly productive because they extend this learning to the community, which opens space for school-community partnerships. However, this overlap in learning is limited to moral development, and does not extend to academics. Future research could potentially explore whether a moral development frame could be used to introduce the need for engagement and then serve as a jumping off point for other forms of engagement.

CULTURAL MODELS OF FAMILY

The ways in which members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers think about family shapes how they understand engagement between families on one hand, and schools and communities on the other. Three models of family shape people's thinking. All three models are, at different times, used by the public. Practitioners and policymakers primarily drew on the last model of the group—the *Parent as Guide* model—which was recessive for the public.²

The *Family Bubble* Cultural Model

According to this cultural model, the family is a private space where childrearing and child development happen, and family relationships fundamentally determine how children turn out. When thinking with this model, people hold parents primarily—if not solely—responsible for making sure children have good outcomes, independently from external factors and actors. They are also primarily—if not solely—to blame when those outcomes are poor. The model is particularly strong in people's thinking about early childhood, although even when thinking about older children, people widely assume that parents are ultimately responsible—both causally and morally—for how their children do.

Member of the Public: *So when you are born, the first few years of life all of your experiences are pretty much with your family, your mother and father and possibly your siblings, your brothers and sisters. And that's really all you know. Your bubble is really small, you don't know about different countries or different cities or even, you know, what's one block away, all you really know is your bubble.*

Member of the Public: *The most important thing is parenting. [...] The parents are the critical part of the whole thing. How you prepare the next crop. How you prepare them to be part of the community directly reflects on how the community will function. If the crop is prepared properly the community will thrive. If the crop's coming out and it's all spoiled eventually it's all gonna break down. So parenting is probably the most important.*

This model obscures the role of other people and society at large in determining how children develop. Even when participants thought about situations in which the nuclear family needed help to provide for children's needs, they were more likely to focus on extended family, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles, than on actors and institutions outside the family.

This cultural model was widely held by members of the public, but was, unsurprisingly, not apparent among practitioners and policymakers, who have a more direct experience of how systemic factors influence children's outcomes.

The *Total Parenthood* Cultural Model³

In interviews, participants drew on two different ways of thinking about parenting—the *Total Parenthood* cultural model and the *Parent as Guide* cultural model. Members of the public switched back and forth between these two ways of thinking, as did practitioners, although they primarily drew on the *Parent as Guide* model. Policymakers only drew on the *Parent as Guide* model.

In the *Total Parenthood* cultural model, good parenting is assumed to require providing for all of children’s needs and desires, at all times. When thinking with this model, people assume that parents must dedicate their entire lives to satisfying their children’s needs, and that this requires systematically placing their children’s needs and desires above their own.

Member of the Public: *If had a child and the teacher says to me, you know he’s a good kid, he wants to learn but I sense he is afraid of his environment, I’m going to get him out of that environment, I’m going to try to either better myself so I can move him to another location, or I’m going to move him to a better school. Then in that case it requires action from me and I’m going to have to do whatever I have to do to change his environment. And some people say, well, you don’t have the money. I’m going to have to get the money, I’m going to have to work to get the money, I’m going to have to sacrifice to change his environment. You have to be willing sometimes to take on more than you really need to. Sometimes you have to sacrifice if you really care.*

When using this model to think about how parents should be involved in school, participants argued that parents had a duty to be intimately involved in every aspect of their children’s education. Volunteering at school events, attending parent-teacher conferences, monitoring grades and attendance, and helping with homework were not thought of as optional, but as prerequisites for good parenting and children’s academic success. When thinking in this way, people assume that parents must be ever-present in their children’s lives, including their school lives.

Member of the Public: *I love my kids and when you go talk to the teacher, ask the questions: How can I help my child? What is my child doing? What is my child not doing? What do I need to work on? You can’t expect the school to raise your children.*

Practitioner: *It’s important for parents to know what’s going on at school, because to me, as a parent, I want my child to excel and to do well. So, if you want them to do well, you want to know and be involved in their upbringing and not only their upbringing at home but also their education part, and the education part is part of their upbringing too. So, I think [what is needed is] the involvement of having those parents communicate with the teachers, knowing what they are doing each day.*

The *Total Parenthood* cultural model views “total” engagement as a necessary component of good parenting. When thinking in this way, people see engagement as a direct product of parental dedication and commitment. This understanding of engagement prevents recognition of the social factors that prevent engagement, like access to resources, poverty, time-consuming work conditions, or language issues.

The *Parent as Guide* Cultural Model

The *Parent as Guide* cultural model, which was shared across all three groups interviewed, understands parents’ role as managing the opportunities for learning and growth provided by children’s environments. According to this model, parents act as guides rather than as “total providers.” They don’t dictate their child’s activities, but allow them to try new things and make mistakes along the way, by providing the resources and support necessary for them to thrive and succeed in the world outside the family. The goal of parenting, on this model, is to enable children to learn how to make their own way in the world.

Member of the Public: *[Parents] need to teach their kids that any option is an option. You know, there’s a whole world out there, you could go explore, try this a little bit, try this a little bit, try this.*

Practitioner: *For me the role of the adults in a particular family, or parents in a family, is to guide children through life. To ensure that eventually they are prepared to exist and flourish on their own.*

Policymaker: *So I would say ideally at home you want a child with an adult... that is really supporting and nurturing and encouraging them to grow and learn, and be their best possible selves.*

IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL MODELS OF FAMILY

1. **The *Family Bubble* cultural model highlights parents’ role but makes it difficult for people to see families’ need for supports.** Because people already view parents as ultimately responsible for their children’s educational outcomes, it is easy and natural for people to recognize that parents can, and should, be engaged in school. However, *Family Bubble* thinking prevents members of the public from recognizing the many ways in which families’ ability to engage successfully depends on factors outside the family. Viewing the family as a self-contained entity makes it difficult for people to recognize that families’ ability to support children depends on having access to key resources and supports. In turn, the model will make it hard for people to see how successful engagement depends on contextual factors and supports. Communicators will need strategies that leverage the existing recognition

of parents' importance while bringing into view the social context that shapes parenting generally, and family engagement in schools specifically.

2. **The *Total Parenthood* cultural model generates recognition of the value of parental engagement in children's education, but obscures the role of external constraints and supports.** In viewing engagement as the product of parents' dedication and commitment, the *Total Parenthood* model makes it hard for people to recognize how external pressures and lack of resources can undermine parents' ability to help their children academically and engage with schools. The challenge this model poses for communicators is similar to the challenge posed by the *Family Bubble* model—to take advantage of the existing understanding that parent engagement is important while helping people appreciate the ways in which engagement is shaped by social context.
3. **The *Parent as Guide* cultural model fosters a collaborative understanding of parents' role.** In related research on adolescent development, we have found this model to be productive because it aligns with experts' understanding of parenting—particularly for older children. While the model is less central for thinking about engagement, it is a potentially productive model on this issue because it represents an open and collaborative model of parenting, in which parents partner with schools, communities, and children themselves to promote exploration and healthy development. The *Parent as Guide* model shares the benefit of the above models in that it recognizes a vital role for families in children's education while avoiding the downsides of these models. To take fullest advantage of this productive model, communicators will need to explain clearly how schools and communities can best support parents' scaffolding role.

CULTURAL MODELS OF SCHOOL

As with families, the public has diverse ways of thinking about schools, while practitioners and policymakers tend to think about schools in more consistent ways. Below, we review the cultural models of schools that are available to these groups and discuss their implications for communicating about engagement.

The *Tangible Triad* Cultural Model

When thinking with the *Tangible Triad* cultural model, members of the public and practitioners understand the education system in terms of its three most visible players: students, parents, and teachers. The model reflects the deep tendency, embodied by the *Places = People* foundational model, to reduce places to the people in them—teachers stand for the school, parents stand for the home, and children have distinct roles in each space—as sons and daughters in the home, and as students at school. In the *Tangible Triad* model, each actor has a well-defined role to play in education: teachers are responsible for creating

and maintaining a successful learning environment, students are responsible for showing up and working hard, and parents are responsible for supporting them both.⁴

Researcher: *Who would I meet at a school?*

Member of the Public: *Teachers obviously. There's teachers for each of those specific courses, or if it's a younger age—we'll call it preschool or kindergarten—they might teach all of the subjects in the class throughout the day. And then there's kids. There could also be volunteers or there could be mothers or fathers who want to spend time in the school with their kid but also just to help the school out.*

Practitioner: *The teacher's the person who guides the learning at school. They're the one that's going to lay out what are we going to learn today. What do we start with and what are we going to do next... I believe the parents are there to support whatever is going on, and so my job as the teacher is not just guiding the students, but also the parents. This is what I need from you, this is how you can be helpful at home too.*

When thinking with the *Tangible Triad* model, members of the public and practitioners do not think of the education system *as a system*. They focus exclusively on the people directly involved in students' education without thinking about how their actions are shaped by broader institutions and policies. As a result, when people use this model, they blame poor educational outcomes on one or more of these three responsible parties, and have a hard time thinking about what educational reform at a systems level might look like, or how it might help.

The Faceless System Cultural Model

At times, members of the public treat schools as a faceless system, one-size-fits-all structures incapable of adapting to the needs and specificities of each student and family. When drawing on this model, the public assumes that schools are impersonal bureaucracies that are hard to navigate and unresponsive to students' and families' personal needs.

Member of the Public: *Okay. So, the school is an entity that's too large to interact as an entity. I mean, that one big school cannot interact. It's individuals that have to interact.... You can't touch the principal unless there's an issue... They tell you when your child is out or late, and they leave a robot message. So, that's not true interaction, you know.*

This model represents the public's only way of thinking about school as *organizations*. Unfortunately, the model leads people to assume that schools cannot actually attend to students' and families' specific needs and that schools are fundamentally ill-equipped to foster meaningful relationships with parents, families, and students.

Given practitioners' and policymakers' fundamentally different relationship with schools, it is not surprising that they do not share this cultural model. Because they deal with various people within the school system and help to shape how it works, the system always has a face for them.

The *School Grounds* Cultural Model

When reasoning with the *School Grounds* cultural model, members of the public identify schools with their physical location—their grounds. School is a physical place.

Member of the Public: *It's not like the kids are going to be able to come out, go sit down on the bench, have lunch, and then go back in [to school]. Not without having to come back through the metal detector again when they go in there. And then, that right there ruins the whole feel. Having to go through the metal detector again to get back in school.*

The *School Grounds* cultural model leads people to think about engagement between schools and families as something that can only happen when parents enter the school *building* to volunteer for an event, or to attend parent-teacher conferences and student performances. In other words, family engagement is modeled as physical presence on school grounds.

The *Schools are Families* Professional Cultural Model

Practitioners frequently thought of schools as being like families—like homes away from home, with similar goals and responsibilities towards children. Practitioners described school as a place in which students are nurtured and cared for in the same way that families and parents nurture and care for their children. They also talked about the role and responsibilities of teachers using the same language they used to talk about parents.

Practitioner: *Family isn't necessarily the structure that you live in, that you come home to and you go to sleep in [...]. Family can be the community at the school. So, when we talk about my school, we say the "Flowers Family," and we're talking about the collective. We're talking about the adults and the children in that building and their families.*

Practitioner: *We also do a morning meeting type thing where students can voice their opinions and their thoughts, and they can share topics that we can talk about to make sure that everyone feels safe and like a part of the little family that we have in the classroom.*

As a result, practitioners argued that when families cannot adequately nurture or care for their children, it is the school's responsibility to take over from parents and families.

Practitioner: *[Students] have a lot more to deal with – a lot of other things to deal with at home and their environments. So, in today's time, teachers are almost like social workers as well as teachers as well as advocates as well as, uh, in some cases, mom and dad – a mother and father figure. They're all of those things, you know.*

The Schools Build Citizens Professional Cultural Model

Policymakers and practitioners frequently thought of schools as institutions with a civic purpose. When thinking with this model, policymakers and practitioners assumed that a key purpose of public schooling is creating good citizens. The function of schools, on this view, is to create civic-minded and productive adults who will positively contribute to their communities.

Policymaker: *And if you look back in the origins of education, it was as much about developing citizens [as it was about academics]. It is a public investment. It is publicly financed. And so that means it is an investment that our society is making in ourselves.*

Researcher: *Who might be involved with school?*

Practitioner: *There are administrators who make sure everyone is following the rules. There are parents who should be involved in making sure that their children are getting the tools that they need to become productive citizens and someday move out of their houses. And there are also other stakeholders who are involved in the process, people from the community who are someday going to work with these children, work for these children, employ these children. Just to be productive citizens.*

When using this model of schools, policymakers were able to make a clear connection between family, school, and community engagement and the overall benefits to society.

Researcher: *When families and schools really engage with one another successfully, what effect does this have?*

Policymaker: *Well, it generally has very positive effects on the kids and the families, and as a former social studies teacher, I'll go back to the idea that it's really at the heart of democracy. Because part of the original purpose of public schools is to prepare us to be citizens.*

IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL MODELS OF SCHOOLS

1. **The *Tangible Triad* model obscures the institutional context within which engagement happens.** By figuring education in terms of personal relationships between teachers, parents, and students, the model makes it difficult for people to recognize that education is the product of broader institutions and structures. In turn, thinking with the model will make it difficult for people to see how policy changes at the school, district, or state level can help to facilitate engagement. Communicators will need ways of bringing systems into view to help people see how engagement can best be promoted.
2. **The *Faceless System* model leads people to conclude that schools as institutions cannot be welcoming or encourage authentic interpersonal communication.** The model is highly unproductive because it leads people to assume that schools are ill-equipped to foster the kind of personal relationships that lie at the heart of engagement between families and schools. One of the main challenges for future research will be identifying strategies to help people understand how schools *as institutions* can promote effective engagement.
3. **The *School Grounds* cultural model offers a starting point for thinking about engagement at the school level.** While the model is inherently limited—it limits thinking about engagement to attendance at events like student performances or school events—the model does enable people to think about the school as a whole, as an institution or community, and thus opens space for engagement that goes beyond engagement with teachers. Communicators can leverage the model to help people think about family-school engagement as a range of activities with a variety of actors, and to help people see how school-wide policies, like putting in place events for families to attend, can foster engagement.
4. **The *Schools are Families* model promotes partnership with parents.** When practitioners draw on this model, they see their role as parallel to, and linked with, parents', making them more open to partnering with parents in assisting children's development—particularly their social-emotional skills. While the model doesn't automatically lead to prioritizing family-school engagement, it does lead practitioners to identify a set of common concerns that might serve as a natural focus of engagement. As with several models discussed above, the model does not itself lead to systemic thinking, so if communicators are trying to convince practitioners of the value of changing policies to promote engagement, they will need to make a compelling case about why this should happen through policies rather than informally.

5. The Schools Build Citizens cultural model enables practitioners and policymakers to recognize the collective benefits of engagement. Because the model situates education and engagement in a broader social context, it makes it easy for people to recognize that engagement does not simply benefit individual students but whole communities. When communicating with practitioners and policymakers, advocates can leverage this existing recognition of the civic benefits of engagement to make the case for prioritizing engagement programs.

CULTURAL MODELS OF COMMUNITIES

The public, practitioners, and policymakers draw on a set of partly overlapping, partly divergent set of models to think about community. As we discuss in the implications section, some of these models are considerably more productive than others.

The *Community as Extended Family* Cultural Model

In this model held by the public and practitioners, the community is understood as a collection of individuals connected to each other through interpersonal relationships: it is a group of people who support each other and share common goals of wellbeing and success. The community is modeled as an extended version of the family, where people care about and look out for each other. The mutual concern of neighbors is as fundamental to a thriving community it is to a healthy family.

Member of the Public: *Community is a neighborhood that gets together, helps each other out, or works together. [You] communicate with the neighbors or whoever you are surrounded by in the community, trying to work things out whatever the situation.*

Practitioner: *I would say the community is a place where you live. Maybe the town or the city that is involved with many different types of people that help contribute to that city to make it successful... It's kind of like a bigger version of a family. It's a group of people that want the best for everybody and tries to make the best decisions so that everyone is safe and following the rules and responsible and just so that everyone is able to live their best life.*

This model, consistent with the *Places = People* model, focuses on individuals rather than on organizations and institutions within the community. As such, it does not help people think about the role that organizations and institutions in the community could play to support children's development and education.

The Community Structures Professional Cultural Model

When policymakers think about community, they tend to view it through an institutional lens. Unlike members of the public and practitioners, who focus more on the people living in communities, they think about the organizations and systems in communities.

Researcher: *When communities and schools interact, how does that come about?*

Policymaker: *In some cases it means that the school has really strong partnerships with organizations. I think about schools in DC that have set up a huge number of extracurricular activities and have brought in lots of local community organizations to run those activities for them.*

Policymaker: *I think that what's important is when you have places like schools and afterschool programs, if you have an infrastructure that is bringing kids together, that you take advantage of that infrastructure to serve all of their needs.*

In comparison to the *Community as Extended Family* cultural model, in this model, partnerships between schools and communities are relatively depersonalized and institutionalized, and are conceptualized in a way that is close to how experts think about school and community engagement.

The Unsafe Communities Cultural Model

When thinking about communities' influence on children's education, members of the public often focus exclusively on the potential for communities to interfere with learning. Some communities—particularly poor communities and communities of color—are seen as a potential source of danger and distraction. Participants often focused on the communities they perceived as unsafe, which led them to discuss worst-case scenarios combining abusive or impoverished homes, gangs, drugs, and violence. This model, which was dominant among members of the public, was not shared by practitioners⁵ and policymakers.

Member of the Public: *If there's a school in the midst of a community that is not as supportive, not as loving, not as caring, and there are a lot of things going on in the community surrounding it that are not conducive to learning, I think it affects the school tremendously. If a kid is walking to school and has to walk by a drunk or walk by needles or walk by gang members or that kind of thing—you know, I'm just kind of putting it up there—but that affects them. By the time they get to school, they're wondering "am I going to be able to get home safely?" That kind of thing.*

Member of the Public: *If Jimmy is afraid to come to school, Jimmy is not going to want to learn. He can be great at home but once he leaves the home, he's afraid.*

While the *Unsafe Communities* model provides a way of thinking about how communities influence learning in school, the model exclusively highlights the negative ways in which community environments impact learning. The model is thus one-sided—it does not bring into view the ways in which communities can positively support children's outcomes.

The *Culture of Poverty* Cultural Model

Members of the public and practitioners often suggested that poor communities are negative influences on students because they devalue education.⁶ When drawing on this model, which we have identified in research on related issues, people reason that poor communities are unable to achieve economic success because their culture does not value hard work and academic achievement. Participants suggested that in these poor communities, people view education as uncool or pointless; they even talked about how children who do well in school in these communities might be ridiculed or bullied as a result.

Practitioner: *If you have individuals where... unfortunately I have to use this example, when you know, all they know is the street life. They only know the street life based on what they have been around and have been exposed to. So, when you're looking at the environment around you and everyone else is doing the same thing, that then becomes all you know.*

Member of the Public: *I think that a lot of people are affected by what they see around them. So, if the community acts poorly in any environment, I think that the children will reflect that... When you see something negative all the time, then you begin to believe that that is the norm. As long as I'm living here, that's how I'm expected to be. You know, if he can act like that and there are no consequences, I can act like that with no consequences.*

When thinking with this model, participants assumed that poor communities' cultures perpetuate the cycle of poverty and make it almost impossible to escape. The *Culture of Poverty* model, like the *Unsafe Communities* model, focuses solely on how communities negatively influence students. Moreover, by attributing the struggles of these communities to their culture or values, it obscures the ways in which structural inequalities and racism and other forms of systemic discrimination perpetuate discrepancies in academic achievement between communities.

The *Poverty Matters* Professional Cultural Model

In contrast to the *Culture of Poverty* model, the *Poverty Matters* model, which was widely used by both practitioners and policymakers, attributes economic and educational disparities to the social and economic constraints that poverty imposes on people (e.g. social capital, access to transportation, work conditions, and time constraints). When thinking with this model, participants highlighted the ways in which poverty systematically limits opportunities for economic success and academic achievement. This model provides a systemic-level understanding of why it is more difficult for students from low-income communities to succeed at school.

Practitioners and policymakers applied the model directly to engagement, noting that economic constraints practically limit families' and schools' ability to engage with one another.

Practitioner: *When I think about the school that I'm at now, that I've been for seven years, versus my four-year stint down in [city name removed] – its two completely different things. [...] We would have an end of the year picnic, but you would not get hardly any parents to come. They were working. And now, at the school I'm at, we will have family dance night, and we will have almost a thousand people last year. I mean it's completely different. Like, you can't keep the people away.*

Policymaker: *For middle- and upper-class families you think of family-school engagement, parents going to PTA meetings, parents going to games, parents being heavily involved in their kid's learning in school. Because they know that's going to help their kid succeed. But I think that it's unfair to expect all parents to be able to do that, and the kids are the ones that bear the brunt of that, and it's not because the parents are bad parents. It's because they can't afford to be home from work, when their kid gets home from school, or from after school, or they don't have the background themselves.*

IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL MODELS OF COMMUNITY

1. **The *Community as Extended Family* cultural model prevents members of the public and practitioners from thinking about community engagement in a formalized way.** The model does, usefully, lead people to think about how community members can support families and children. However, because community is understood wholly in terms of personal relationships within the model, it backgrounds the ways in which community engagement can be formalized through community organizations and institutions. Communicators need strategies to build a more institutional understanding of community in order to open space for formal modes of engagement.

2. **The *Community Structures* cultural model supports productive thinking about community engagement.** The model enables policymakers to think about how schools can partner with community organizations in order to promote student learning and address student needs. In communicating with policymakers, advocates should emphasize the importance of building relationships between schools and other community institutions, and note the ways in which student outcomes are improved via these partnerships.
3. **The *Unsafe Communities* and *Culture of Poverty* cultural models stigmatize poor communities and obscure the structural factors that produce educational disparities.** These models perpetuate negative perceptions of poor communities that treat these communities as monolithic blocs characterized by violence or bad values. By attributing poor economic and educational outcomes to the character of the communities themselves, these models make it difficult for the public and practitioners to see the structural and systemic factors that lie at the root of educational disparities. In turn, these models foreclose an equitable approach to engagement that focuses on addressing these structural factors and providing the resources necessary to enable engagement with families and communities experiencing poverty. Communicators must be careful not to mention violence without explaining its structural sources, and should avoid overstressing the importance of valuing education, as this is likely to reinforce the assumption that “those” people don’t already value it.
4. **The *Poverty Matters* cultural model is highly productive for communicating about equity in engagement.** When this model is active, policymakers and practitioners adopt a structural perspective toward engagement. Communicators should seek to cue this model by explicitly discussing the structural and systemic sources of educational disparities and explaining the need for policies to address these sources, including policies that promote family, school, and community engagement in low-income communities by addressing economic and social barriers.

CULTURAL MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

Alongside the foundational models and the particular models of family, school, and community discussed above lie a set of specific models of engagement. These models are linked with some of the models discussed above while offering discrete ways of thinking about what engagement among families, schools, and communities does or should involve. These models center on the relationship between families and schools, which, as we discuss below, results directly from their tendency to see communities as collections of individuals and their difficulty in thinking institutionally about communities.

The Care Transference Cultural Model

In the *Care Transference* model—held by both members of the public and practitioners—engagement between schools and families is fundamentally about the expression of, and the transfer of, care between teachers, parents, and students. The *Care Transference* model builds on the assumption of the *Caring Lynchpin* model that relationships are fundamentally about caring, adding the idea that through engagement teachers, parents, and students can actually generate concern in other parties.

Both members of the public and practitioners reason that teachers “care”—or care *more*—about a student’s well-being and success if parents demonstrate that they themselves “care” by being involved in their children’s education—by helping with homework, volunteering, or diligently attending parent-teacher conferences. Both groups assumed that the transfer of care can work in the other direction as well: if parents think a teacher really “cares” about their child, they put in extra effort to engage with their child’s learning. As for students, when they see their parents and teachers care enough to engage with one another, they will make an extra effort at school.

Member of the Public: *When your mother comes up to school and you see that she cares, the child sees that they care, the teachers see that they care and so now more caring and more attention will be addressed to that kid [...]. If I’m the teacher and I see that that parent really cares, and that the student is really trying, it has to be some type of action from all parties. It has to be action from the teacher to say, “I see that this parent wants their kids to learn.” And then there has to be action from the kids to show that they want to learn.*

Practitioner: *It’s important for parents to come out and support their students. We have a ceremony for students who’ve shown improvement. They brought their grades up. They may not be on the honor roll, but to go from a 1.0 to a 2.0 is a really big accomplishment. So, we need parents to come out and support those types of things. We need parents to show that they care, because we can’t care more than their parents care.*

The Repeat and Reinforce Cultural Model

In the *Repeat and Reinforce* model, the relationship between schools and families is assumed to be hierarchical and unidirectional—it is families’ job to repeat and reinforce the academic lessons that children receive in the classroom. On this model—shared by members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers—engagement between families and schools should involve the transmission of information *from* schools *to* families about what content they should be reinforcing *at home*. People typically assume this content is academic and

involves helping students with homework or other school projects. Engagement enables schools to “pass the baton” of academic learning to families and make sure that learning is repeated and reinforced in both settings.

Member of the Public: *Family and education go hand in hand. I mean, the teacher is there to teach your child. That’s what they do. But whenever they’re at home you need to continue whatever they’re learning. You need to help them.*

Practitioner: *Parents need to reinforce what we’re teaching their children at home. There’s that summer backslide where, because learning is not necessarily taking place every day, students forget what they’ve learned during the school year. It’s important that parents be there to assist with homework, because it’s important to reinforce the skills that [students] learn in the classroom once they get home. It’s important for parents to be involved, because their children need their support. We can’t teach a child by ourselves. It’s important that the parents be involved in, and buy into, the process of educating their children.*

Policymaker: *Parents ideally are going to interact with teachers, and principals, and students to support what’s happening in the school day and complement it at home.*

The *Compartmentalized Learning Cultural Model*

The core assumption of the *Compartmentalized Learning* cultural model is that what is learned inside and outside of the classroom is fundamentally different. When thinking with this model, members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers divide learning into two distinct categories: first, abstract knowledge is acquired inside the classroom, through interactions between the teacher and the students; and second, practical and interpersonal skills, including discipline, are learned outside of the classroom through interactions with peers on the playground and in the community, and most importantly, from family members at home.

Member of the Public: *School is a place that you learn things that you may not have learned before. And it may be learning to read, learning to write [...] parents need to help their children in social skills, in responsibility like the example of putting your toys away.*

Practitioner: *School is a place where we send our children from ages 5 through usually ages 18 to get an education about our society and also to get an education about how to read, how to write, how to communicate, how to problem solve, and how to grow up and be productive citizens [...] At home we learn everything about learning how to talk, learning how to walk, learning how to interact with others—whether that’s interacting positively or whether that’s interacting negatively.*

Policymaker: *The primary focus at a school has been academic learning. I think that wall has been challenged a little bit from time to time. I think it's still the primary focus of the organizations. School is to impart some academic content and learning of that content that would better enable people to be prosperous adults.*

When thinking of this model, people treat classroom learning and home learning as different in kind. In contrast to the *Repeat and Reinforce* model, when people think with the *Compartmentalized Learning* model, they implicitly assume that there's a basic division of labor between home and classroom—kids learn different things in each place. When using the model to think about engagement, people tend to assume that robust engagement is not vital, since the core functions of families and schools are just different. When they do think about family and school engagement with this model, they tend to focus on children's social and interpersonal skills—how kids are getting along with others, whether they are learning to be respectful, etc.—since social skills are at stake on the playground and at home.

The *Crisis Management Cultural Model*

When reasoning with the *Crisis Management* cultural model, members of the public assume that one of the main functions of family and school engagement—apart from information transfer about homework—is to resolve crises that might occur during the school year. For instance, a student might start performing poorly academically, or have behavioral problems. At that point, people argue that teachers or principals should reach out to parents to inform them of the problems, inquire after what might be occurring at home, and meet to resolve the problem.

Member of the Public: *[Interactions between schools and families] don't have to be regular things. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes it is like a "for cause" situation when they know the student's having problems [...] such as aggression, or social behavior like excluding themselves from activities. Things like that.*

Researcher: *When is it the responsibility of the parents to go up and talk to people at school and when is it the responsibility of the school to go to the parents?*

Member of the Public: *[...] You know, [when] the principal calls the parent and says the child got in trouble for whatever reason, and that's when the parent's job is to go up to the school and find out what's going on.*

Practitioners and policymakers did not hold this model because current professional norms and common practice encourage other opportunities for engagement throughout the school year, such as parent-teacher conferences, classroom newsletters, opportunities for parent volunteering, and family events inside and outside the school building.

The *Engagement is Personal Cultural Model*

Drawing on the *Places = People*, *Caring Lynchpin*, and *Faceless System* cultural models, members of the public and practitioners consistently understand family, school, and community engagement as connections between specific individuals. In other words, engagement is assumed to be initiated *by* individuals, and it takes the form of relationships *between* individuals. People also assume that the more personal the relationship, the better the engagement. Good engagement between teachers and parents involves getting to know each other as people, outside their roles.

Researcher: *So, you think teachers and parents having more casual social interactions is a good thing?*

Member of the Public: *Yes. [...] Every once in a while, you want to get to know the person that's teaching your kids. Maybe on a social level not related to the children other than the fact they're being taught by this person. Maybe you want to know them. I'm weird, I want to know everything about you. So, if you're teaching my kid, I'm gonna want to know what kind of BBQ sauce you like.*

Researcher: *Why is that important to have that channel between you and the parents, in that easy, accessible way that you have it?*

Practitioner: *I just think that communication helps the kid know that we are constantly communicating back and forth. I think that, in a way, it's like, you gained a new friend, not saying parents are going to be your friends for ever and ever and ever, but for that year, I'm kind of like a second parent. So, we're kind of parenting that child for that nine months together.*

When thinking about possible forms of community engagement, members of the public use the model to think about good Samaritans or neighbors who might help a specific child. When people are in direct contact with a child in the community—especially if they have a preexisting personal relationship with the child—they may see a need and take steps to help that child out.

Member of the Public: *If my neighbor's got kids and I've got kids, or if I'm friends with my neighbor and I see that their kid's acting up when their parents aren't home, I would say something. I would go over there, I would do something about it.*

The Spectrum of Self-Makingness Cultural Model

According to this cultural model, held by members of the public and practitioners, the level of engagement between families on one hand, and schools and communities on the other, is dictated by children's level of independence, and children are assumed to naturally become more independent over time. In early childhood, when children depend on their parents for their wellbeing, parents are assumed to be responsible for children's outcomes, and, in turn, parents should engage with teachers to make sure their children are learning what they should. By high school, students are assumed to have acquired enough skills and knowledge to become capable of ensuring their own success. In turn, they become responsible for their own outcomes, and significant parental engagement with teachers and people in the community is not necessary.

Member of the Public: *Looking at it from K-12, I would think that the child probably needs more help the younger they are, because they have less life experiences, they have less knowledge of everything. And as the kid learns and grows, they begin to be able to take care of themselves all the way up to where the kid needs no help at all. So I would say gradually, as they get older, as they grow in the grades, the parent would probably be less involved.*

Practitioner: *Freshmen parents are far more involved than senior parents. So, the seniors – they're like, "look, I'm just trying to get them out of school. They know the lay of the land. Call me if there's a problem, but you know, I think they got it." So, senior parents are far more hands-off than 9th grade parents. And again, this is just my observation over my many years of teaching.*

The Modern World Disconnects Cultural Model

Members of the public widely assume that modern technology gets in the way of engagement between families, schools, and communities. According to the *Modern World Disconnects* cultural model, personal technology and social media interfere with people's ability to form relationships generally, and, in turn, limit rich personal engagement between family members, teachers, neighbors, and others. For instance, members of the public blame phones and electronic devices for a lack of effective communication between parents and children, and for the dearth of positive interactions between community members.

Member of the Public: *Social media, in general, I think is taking over. Taking over as the world's babysitter. Or world's teacher. Social media is becoming the teacher now.*

Member of the Public: *I don't know if it's not too late [for engagement] because of technology. I think the cell phone is the best invention and the worst invention because it has put a wedge between us. It really has.*

As technological progress is thought to be unstoppable, the *Modern World Disconnects* model leads members of the public to fatalistic thinking: they assume that while strong family, school, and community engagement would be great in theory, it is never going to happen under current circumstances.

To some extent, practitioners shared the *Modern World Disconnects* cultural model: they explain how technology has made it harder for children to learn how to communicate and learn. However, our data suggest that this model can be pushed aside by positive experiences with technology. In our practitioner interviews conducted in North Dakota, where the use of a software application designed to improve communication between parents and teachers is mandated, this model was much more recessive, as practitioners consistently praised the use of new technologies as an effective method for real-time engagement.

The *Charismatic Leadership Professional Cultural Model*

Practitioners and policymakers widely understood changes in educational practices as a top-down process driven by individual leaders. While this model includes a role for policy, within the model, it is personal leadership that is understood to truly drive change. Practitioners and policymakers both assumed that the only way to get teachers and other staff to “buy into” new ideas and new ways of doing things is to have strong leaders at higher levels of responsibility model that change for them. When thinking about ways to improve family, school, and community engagement specifically, practitioners and policymakers argued that new programs and policies can only be effective if they have visible support from a principal or a superintendent with strong leadership skills and the personal charisma to motivate people. In other words, the personal leadership of school or district leaders plays a pivotal role in bringing about changes in practice.

Policymaker: *I think there has just got to be incredible leadership. Like best leadership. You can set up all the systems and structure in the world, but if you don't just have rock star people running them...*

Researcher: *Do you think family, school, and community engagement has been a priority issue in your work?*

Practitioner: *[The school] I'm at now, with the principal I have now, yes. I had a different administrator for my first three years and it was not really a priority. It was not his forte to interact positively with families, to create opportunities for them to come in. My administrator that I have now said: we need a family involvement committee, we need to think of some extra ways to get families involved.*

This model is a professional cultural model at its core: in our interviews, practitioners and policymakers consistently relied on it to make sense of the dynamics at play in their work environment and field of expertise. Members of the public—whose knowledge of the inner workings of schools and educational systems is much more limited—did not use this model.

The Cognitive Hole of Community Engagement

In interviews, members of the public and practitioners rarely discussed community engagement. While they occasionally mentioned donations and fundraisers, school efforts to beautify neighborhoods, afterschool programs, or visits to the school by community members, overall, they were not able to sketch out a coherent role for the community in the engagement scenarios they were envisioning. This is the direct result of how people think about community. Because members of the public and practitioners tend to understand community as a collection of individuals, it is hard to think of ways in which communities can systematically engage with schools and families. In addition, as we have discussed, when members of the public do think of communities in more collective terms, they typically are thinking negatively about communities as violent environments or negative cultural influences, and these models do not lead to positive thinking about constructive engagement.

IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

1. **The Care Transference cultural model personalizes engagement in ways that make systemic thinking difficult.** While the model does help members of the public and practitioners see the importance of establishing regular, communicative relationships between parents and teachers, it focuses thinking on the character and motivation of individual teachers and parents. This obscures the need for formal programs that facilitate engagement. In addition, in spotlighting parent-teacher relationships, it leaves other educators and the community out of sight. Communicators must be careful not to over-emphasize caring—as discussed above with the *Caring Lynchpin* model—as this will prevent people from adopting a systemic perspective toward engagement.
2. **The Repeat and Reinforce cultural model reinforces the importance of engagement while narrowing understanding of its purpose and practice.** This model creates a perception of engagement as the one-way transfer of academic information about the child from teachers to families. This prevents members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers from seeing non-academic benefits and the importance of multidirectional engagement. Communicators need strategies for broadening thinking about the purpose and practice of engagement.

3. **The *Compartmentalized Learning* cultural model threatens to undermine engagement.** Because the model strongly distinguishes between classroom and out-of-classroom learning, it undermines thinking about the importance of engagement on academics.
4. **The *Crisis Management* cultural model prevents members of the public from seeing the need for active parental engagement when students were doing well in school.** The model is thus highly unproductive, and communicators will need to expand people's understanding of the purpose of engagement and, in turn, when and how it should happen.
5. **The *Engagement is Personal* cultural model directly blocks systemic thinking.** By leading people to see engagement in highly personalized terms, it makes it hard for members of the public to see how engagement can be formally promoted through school- or district-wide policies and programs. Communicators must identify strategies for pivoting away from the highly individualized aspects of relationships to the common practices of engagement that don't depend on meshing of personalities.
6. **The *Spectrum of Self-Makingness* cultural model leaves little room for strong parental or community engagement for teenagers.** Rather than enabling people to see the importance of age-appropriate engagement—as experts highlight—the model makes engagement for teenagers seem wholly unnecessary. Communicators will need ways of helping people see what engagement with older children should involve and how it would help.
7. **The *Modern World Disconnects* cultural model makes engagement seem unrealistic.** By generally undermining people's hopes for meaningful relationships and engagement, the model makes the possibility of improving engagement seem like pure fantasy. To avoid cuing the model, communicators should be careful not to overemphasize the challenges of modern life. When talking about technology, communicators should be sure to explain how technology can connect people, as a way of countering default assumptions.
8. **The *Charismatic Leadership* professional cultural model makes widespread and durable prioritization of engagement seem impossible.** By leading practitioners and policymakers to see institutional change as an outgrowth of leaders' personalities and style, it makes effective reform seem highly idiosyncratic and contingent. This makes the widespread adoption of effective engagement practices seem highly unlikely, since not all school and district leaders will have the required mix of personal commitment and charismatic leadership. Communicators must be careful to avoid cuing this model, and should avoid stressing the heroic leadership of champions, in order to prevent the fatalism that the model leads to.

Taken together, the cultural models presented above comprise the swamp of public, practitioner, and policymaker understanding on the topic of family, school, and community engagement. These are the implicit understandings

and assumptions that lie just under the surface and become active when representatives from these three groups are asked to think about engagement. The following box depicts this swamp of understanding.

THE SWAMP OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

WHAT'S IN THE SWAMP OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

FOUNDATIONAL MODELS

- Places = People
 - *School = Teachers*
 - *Home = Nuclear Family*
 - *Community = Neighbors*
- Caring Lynchpin
- Morals, Manners, and Responsibility

FAMILY MODELS

- Total Parenthood
- Parent as Guide
- Family Bubble

SCHOOL MODELS

- Tangible Triad
- Faceless System
- School Grounds
- *Schools are Families**
- *Schools Build Citizens**

COMMUNITY MODELS

- Communities are Extended Families
- *Community Structures**
- Unsafe Communities
- Culture of Poverty
- *Poverty Matters**

ENGAGEMENT MODELS

- Care Transference
- Repeat and Reinforce
- Compartmentalized Learning
- Crisis Management
- Engagement is Personal
- Spectrum of Self-Makingness
- Modern World Disconnects
- *Charismatic Leadership**
- Community Cognitive Hole

** Models in this format represent cultural models found among practitioners and/or policymakers.*

Mapping the Gaps: Key Communications Challenges

In this report, we have reviewed how experts think about family, school, and community engagement, and described how members of the public, education practitioners, and policymakers understand the topic. In this section, we identify the overlaps between the expert perspective, on one hand, and the perspectives of each of these three groups, and then map the gaps between them to reveal important communications challenges and opportunities.

Experts, members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers all share the following understandings:

- Parents should be **actively engaged in their children's education**. All four groups recognize the value of parental involvement in education.
- Strong parental involvement in children's education is important **when children are young**. While, as we note below, there are differences in opinion about the need for parental involvement in later childhood, all four groups see the value of engagement at early ages.
- **Schools need to be welcoming and teachers should make an active effort to engage** parents. All of the groups take for granted that schools and teachers should actively cultivate connection with parents, although the public, practitioners, and policymakers have a much less systemic understanding about how this should be accomplished than experts.
- When parents and teachers engage, **children are more likely to be successful** and value their schooling experience. In particular, all four groups recognize that children benefit academically from family engagement in schools.

These are areas where the public, practitioners, and policymakers are already in agreement with experts. Communicators can build on this common ground to communicate key ideas about family, school, and community engagement, and move public thinking in positive directions.

Practitioners' and policymakers' understandings of engagement overlap with experts' to a greater extent than the public's. The following understandings are shared by practitioners, policymakers, and experts—but not the public:

- Educational disparities between lower- and higher-income students are, to a large extent, the product of the **social and economic constraints** that poverty imposes. All three groups recognize how structural factors influence educational outcomes.
- **Influences outside the family play a significant role in shaping outcomes** for children from the earliest ages. In contrast to members of the public, who attribute outcomes almost exclusively to the family, practitioners and policymakers recognize that schools and other influences within children's communities play a critical role from birth.
- There are **critical players in the educational system beyond teachers, parents, and students**. Given their practical experience with the system, practitioners and policymakers have a broader view of the players involved than the public does and recognize, like experts, the role of players beyond the classroom at both the school and district level.
- Family, school, and community **engagement benefits society by fostering civic-mindedness** in children.

In addition, practitioners and experts agree on the following points:

- **Technology can be a productive tool** for engagement. Both groups recognize that, if used properly, technology can help facilitate communication between educators and families.

In addition, policymakers and experts agree on the following points:

- **Community engagement can be achieved** through effective collaboration between families, school leaders, and community organizations. Because policymakers understand community in more institutional terms than practitioners and the public, they see how community engagement can be formalized.
- **All families can be engaged**. In contrast to the public and practitioners, who tend to assume that some families just don't care about their kids' education and can't be effectively engaged, policymakers recognize that barriers to engagement are primarily structural rather than motivational. Policymakers, like experts, recognize that with the right programs and policies in place, all families can be effectively engaged.
- Educational reform involves **systems change**. While policymakers tend, like the public and practitioners, to overemphasize the role of personal relationships, they recognize, like experts, that durable educational reform is possible with the right policies and programs. Unsurprisingly, policymakers recognize the importance of policy in a way that the public and practitioners do not.

GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC

In addition to the overlaps described above, there is a set of significant gaps between expert and public understandings of family, school, and community engagement. These gaps represent key areas that must be addressed in reframing engagement for the public.

- 1. How Engagement Happens: Systems vs. People.** While experts emphasize that engagement is something that needs to be institutionalized through programs and policies, the public understands engagement primarily in terms of individual relationships between people. As a result, members of the public focus narrowly on relationships between teachers and parents, and view these relationships as resulting from personal effort rather than systemic practice. This deep gap underlies others below, since the public's resistance to the idea that engagement can be promoted through systemic efforts undermines recognition of the value of many aspects of experts' agenda.
- 2. Ingredients of Engagement: Learned Skills vs. Caring.** Experts emphasized that education practitioners can be trained to implement engagement practices and that parents can also learn how to engage with their children's schools. They understand engagement as a set of skills to be learned. The public, on the other hand, assumes that the only ingredient for effective engagement is caring on the part of teachers and parents. And because caring is assumed to be something that teachers and parents either have or don't have—it can't be taught—effective engagement, in turn, is understood as something that cannot be taught.
- 3. Schools: Welcoming Institutions vs. Just the Classroom or Impersonal System.** Experts argue that schools can, and should be, inclusive, welcoming institutions that become the center of communities. Members of the public, by contrast, tend to equate schools with classrooms only—and with teachers specifically—while the broader system remains out of mind. When they do think about schools as institutions, they see them as closed off and impersonal, staffed by faceless bureaucrats who are inaccessible to families. As a result, the public struggles to think about productive forms of engagement beyond traditional parent-teacher interactions.
- 4. Community Engagement: Essential vs. Off the Radar.** While experts think of community engagement as vital, members of the public rarely think about community engagement at all, focusing almost exclusively on engagement between families and schools. The public's tendency to think of communities as individual neighbors leaves intentional engagement with community organizations out of sight, and the public's focus on *negative* community influences makes constructive engagement with communities hard to think.
- 5. Who Should Be Engaged: Every Family vs. Caring Families.** While experts note that intentional, inclusive outreach can enable productive engagement

with all families, the public assumes that some parents just don't care about their children's education, making engagement with "those" families impossible. This gap results from the public's tendency to see engagement purely as a function of individual concern, coupled with negative, racialized stereotypes of families living in poverty. This is a fatalistic view of family engagement in which only "good" parents are willing to engage and no amount of effort will convince other parents to get involved.

6. **When Should Engagement Happen: Early and Often vs. Crisis Management.** According to the experts, engagement should begin in pre-school, start before the beginning of each school year, and occur regularly throughout the school year. The public, on the other hand, thinks that outside of the occasional parent-teacher conference, engagement is only necessary during times of crisis, when students are having academic or behavioral problems. This focus on crisis points makes it difficult for members of the public to conceive of—or see the need for—early and ongoing engagement.
7. **Age for Engagement: All Ages vs. Only Early Childhood.** While experts stress that engagement should be sensitive to children's developmental needs, they insist that engagement is crucial from early childhood through adolescence. The public, however, assumes that active family engagement is really only necessary in the pre-school and early elementary years, and that once children reach high school parental engagement is unnecessary because students are primarily responsible for their own education.
8. **Benefits of Engagement: Everyone Benefits vs. Only Students Benefit.** Experts note that when engagement is successful, this not only benefits students but also parents, schools, and communities. Parents benefit through stronger relationships with their children and through stronger connections to their communities. Schools benefit through additional assistance in the classroom, improved school climate, enhanced teacher satisfaction, and improvements in schools' academic achievement. Communities benefit through stronger social cohesion and civic connectedness. Members of the public only see the benefits to students, and do not recognize these wider benefits to families, schools, and communities.
9. **Equity: Key Concern vs. Absent from Thinking.** Experts see equity as a crucial element of engagement. Well-constructed programs and policies can enhance educational equity by enhancing educators' understanding of family situations and concerns, addressing implicit bias, and boosting the achievement of underserved students. By contrast, due to the public's personalized understanding of engagement and negative stereotypes of people in poverty, members of the public generally do not think about equity as a relevant consideration or goal when thinking about engagement.
10. **Policy: Key Lever vs. Missing from Consideration.** Experts advance policy as a key means to promote engagement, while policy is almost wholly missing from public thinking about the issue. This gap stems from the systems vs.

people gap (the first gap listed above). Helping the public see policy as a way of promoting engagement will require first helping them see how engagement results from—or is impeded by—institutional and systemic factors.

GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN EXPERTS AND PRACTITIONERS

While practitioners, not surprisingly, are closer to experts than the public is in their understanding of family, school, and community engagement, analysis revealed several significant gaps between the two.

1. **How Engagement Happens: Systems vs. People.** Practitioners, like the public, tend to think about engagement in terms of personal relationships rather than systems. While practitioners have a broader view of the people involved, the gap between experts' systemic understanding of engagement and practitioners' personal understanding is, in essence, the same as the gap that exists between experts and the public.
2. **Ingredients of Engagement: Learned Skills vs. Caring.** Like the public, practitioners think of engagement in terms of innate concern or care, rather than in terms of learned skills, as experts do. This gap, like the first, is essentially the same as the gap that exists between experts and the public on the ingredients of engagement.
3. **Community Engagement: Essential vs. Off the Radar.** While experts emphasize the importance and benefits of positive community engagement, practitioners, like the public, struggle to think about how communities can be positively engaged, and draw on similar stereotypes of poor communities that block constructive thinking about community engagement.
4. **Who Should Be Engaged: Every Family vs. Caring Families.** There is a gap between experts and practitioners around who can, and should, be engaged, just as there is between experts and the public. Practitioners' assumption that some families don't care and are out of reach is deeply unproductive and prevents them from adopting the expert view that engagement is possible and vital for all families.
5. **Age for Engagement: All Ages vs. Only Early Childhood.** Practitioners, like the public—but unlike experts—assume that parental engagement is only important in pre-school and elementary school. Communicators thus face the challenge of convincing practitioners and the public alike that engagement remains vital through high school.
6. **Equity: Key Concern vs. Absent from Thinking.** Practitioners tend not to think about the larger systemic outcomes of effective engagement and share the same personalized understanding of engagement and negative stereotypes of people in poverty as the public. As a result, like the public (and unlike

experts), they generally do not think about equity as a relevant consideration or goal when thinking about engagement.

7. **Policy: Key Lever vs. Backgrounded.** Among practitioners, policy is backgrounded or absent from thinking about engagement. This is, in part, because practitioners share the public's focus on people (vs. systems), and in part because they tend to focus on their everyday experiences as educators at the classroom level. This personal experience makes it difficult for them to consider the ways in which engagement can be promoted systemically through policy.
8. **Improving Engagement: Institutional Change vs. Charismatic Leadership.** Experts stress that promoting engagement requires institutional changes at all levels—federal, state, district, and school. While experts recognize the value of leadership, they view institutional change as a durable set of programmatic and culture changes that do not depend on individual leaders. Practitioners, by contrast, tightly associate change with charismatic leadership, seeing it as a direct outgrowth of the style and commitment of individual leaders and as contingent on these leaders' personal actions. This overwhelming focus on charismatic leadership prevents practitioners from seeing how engagement can be effectively and durably institutionalized, and leads to fatalism in situations where individual leaders lack heroic qualities.

GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN EXPERTS AND POLICYMAKERS

While policymakers are closer to experts in their thinking about engagement than both the public and practitioners, there are nonetheless two important gaps between experts and policymakers, which coincide with gaps with the public and practitioners described above.

1. **Ingredients of Engagement: Learned Skills vs. Caring.** Like the public and practitioners, policymakers stress caring to the exclusion of other ingredients of engagement. While experts see engagement as grounded in a set of learned skills and see training as an effective way of promoting engagement, policymakers assume that engagement is, at some level, a product of teachers', parents', and community leaders' commitment and concern. Although policymakers, as we would expect, view policy as a means of promoting engagement, the idea that engagement depends on personal character fundamentally circumscribes *what* policymakers believe policy can accomplish.
2. **Improving Engagement: Institutional Change vs. Charismatic Leadership.** Like practitioners, policymakers see charismatic leadership of school and district leaders as central to effective engagement. This emphasis on individual leadership stands in contrast to experts' focus on program and institutional culture more broadly. As with practitioners, the focus on heroic leadership undermines thinking about effective institutionalization of engagement and produces fatalism about situations where exceptional leaders are lacking.

Initial Recommendations and Future Research

At some level, everyone—the public, education practitioners, and policymakers alike—recognize that family, school, and community engagement is valuable. Unlike controversial social issues, there is no one actively opposed to engagement. Everyone involved understands that it is good for parents to be involved in their children’s education, believes schools should welcome parental engagement, and recognizes that engagement between families and schools is good for students. And while the public and practitioners do not tend to think about community engagement, this is not because they’re opposed to it, but simply because they lack easily accessible ways of thinking about how communities can engage with families and schools.

While this baseline positivity toward engagement is helpful, advocates for engagement face a much steeper hill than a superficial look might suggest. Although no one is actively opposed to engagement, existing ways of thinking about families, schools, communities, and engagement undercut the field’s objectives—particularly ways of thinking among the general public and education practitioners. The most basic problem is the reduction of places to people and the corresponding tendency to think about engagement in highly personalized terms that exclude formal, institutionalized ways of promoting engagement from people’s thinking. Moreover, the focus on caring as the core of engagement—across the public, practitioners, and policymakers—prevents people from seeing how effective engagement skills can be learned through training programs. Assumptions about communities experiencing poverty and older children erect further barriers to adoption of effective engagement policies and practices.

The cultural models analysis presented in this report has direct implications for communications practice. By understanding which existing ways of thinking are productive, which are unproductive, and where explanation is needed to fill in holes in public thinking, advocates in the field can immediately improve their communications practice. Further research is needed to identify the best

ways of tackling the most difficult communications challenges that emerge from this study, but based on the cultural models findings, we can offer the following provisional recommendations about what to do and what not to do:

- **Talk about places as institutions.** It is vital for communicators to frame engagement as relationships between institutions, not just people. Focusing on personal relationships will reinforce the public’s and practitioners’ tendency to see engagement in individualized terms. Talking about places as institutions means emphasizing programs, policies, school culture, and physical space—elements of schools and communities that cut across people and shape the practices of the entire institution. Whenever possible, communicators should make these aspects of institutions key parts of the stories they are telling.
- **Tell a story that includes more players.** Because the public and practitioners focus narrowly on teachers, parents, and students, it is important to talk about others—for example, administrators at the school and district level, community leaders, afterschool providers, and policymakers. Bringing these other players into view can help broaden people’s view, but must always be done in conjunction with talking about non-personal aspects of institutions to avoid reinforcing the idea that engagement is only about relationships between individuals.
- **Explain structural constraints on engagement.** While the public, practitioners, and policymakers all, to different degrees, understand that socioeconomic constraints can impede engagement, these constraints are not always salient in people’s thinking. To counter less productive ways of thinking about lack of engagement—including blaming parents or teachers for purported lack of concern about children or blaming communities for toxic values or culture—communicators must emphasize structural constraints. This means not only stressing the ways in which poverty makes engagement difficult, but the ways in which cultural and linguistic barriers impede engagement with communities that do not share the dominant culture and language.
- **Provide concrete examples that expand people’s sense of what engagement involves.** Members of the public, in particular, have a very narrow view of engagement, which centers on engagement between parents and teachers during preschool and elementary school, at select times or during crises only. By providing examples of effective engagement that don’t fit this narrow view, communicators can begin to stretch people’s understanding of engagement. In particular, the following types of examples may be useful:
 - *Examples of engagement between parties other than parents and teachers.* This could include engagement between parents and administrators or other school staff, engagement between parents and afterschool providers, engagement between community organizations and families and schools, or other examples.

- *Examples of engagement during high school.* Communicators should make a point of explaining *why* engagement between families and schools during high school is valuable and what benefits it produces.
- *Examples of early and ongoing engagement.* Simply providing examples that go beyond parent-teacher conferences and crisis management should help people recognize that engagement *can* be deeper and more sustained than they tend to assume. While examples alone are likely not sufficient to convince people of the need for fuller and more consistent engagement, they can at least place a different understanding of engagement on people’s radar and open space for a new conception of engagement.
- **Don’t focus on parents’ or teachers’ level of caring.** Talking about care or concern is highly likely to cue the *Caring Lynchpin* and *Care Transference* models and, in the process, to undermine the idea that good policies and programs can effectively promote engagement. Communicators should not only avoid suggesting that some people *don’t* care, but also avoid talking about how much good teachers and parents *do* care, as this will implicitly reinforce the assumption that others don’t.
- **Explain the broader benefits of engagement.** While the public recognizes the benefits of engagement for students, people typically don’t understand the broader benefits of engagement for the community, schools, and parents. Making these benefits explicit and explaining how engagement produces them should help people recognize engagement as vital rather than being merely a nice but inessential bonus.
- **Don’t overemphasize leadership.** When advocates are talking with practitioners and policymakers in particular, they should avoid focusing on the importance of leadership and having effective champions. While leadership is, of course, important (and there’s no need to deny that), dwelling on leadership is likely to cue the *Charismatic Leadership* model and deflect thinking away from the programmatic heart of promoting engagement. When leaders are discussed, communicators should quickly pivot to the policies and programs they have put in place that make engagement efforts durable and sustainable.

These recommendations provide initial strategies that communicators can use to create more effective messages about family, school, and community engagement. Further research is needed to identify communications tools and strategies capable of overcoming the deepest and most challenging gaps we have identified above. The following set of tasks comprises a prospective “to-do” list for future framing research:

- **Enhance public, practitioner, and policymaker understanding of family, school, and community engagement as a systemic process.** Research is needed to identify the best ways of countering the public’s and practitioners’ heavily personalized understanding of engagement and helping them understand how formal programs and policies can promote engagement.

And while policymakers already have a more systemic understanding of engagement, their tendency to focus on leadership and personal caring constrain, in important ways, their recognition of how engagement can be effectively institutionalized. Generating a full understanding of engagement as a systemic process is arguably the most important—and the overarching—task for reframing research, as it must be achieved to create space for productive consideration of experts’ recommended solutions.

- **Develop public and practitioner understanding that all families and communities can, and should, be included in engagement efforts, and that school systems must take affirmative steps to enable equitable engagement.** Members of the public—and to some extent, practitioners—do not see engagement through an equity lens. Members of the public consistently fail to see how structural factors impede engagement and wrongly blame families and communities for a lack of engagement, and practitioners frequently fall into the same patterns. Helping people recognize the equity issues at the root of educational disparities and disparate levels of family involvement in education is a key task, as is helping people see the importance of taking steps to address inequity in engagement.
- **Broaden public thinking about engagement beyond crisis management.** As noted above, providing concrete examples of engagement that don’t fit people’s existing models should help expand thinking about what engagement can involve. However, research is needed to identify the optimal ways of broadening people’s understanding of engagement.
- **Enhance public and practitioner understanding and acceptance of developmentally sensitive and age-appropriate forms of engagement.** Research is needed to identify the best ways of helping the public and practitioners understand that engagement is vital throughout childhood but can, and should, change as children get older.
- **Increase public understanding of the benefits of engagement beyond student achievement.** While highlighting the broader benefits is crucial, as suggested above we do not yet know what way of introducing these benefits is best able to stick with people and become part of how they think about engagement. Further research on this would enable us to test different ways of framing these benefits to see what is most effective.
- **Cultivate understanding of community engagement and its importance.** As noted, there are several cultural models that make it difficult for the public and practitioners to understand the importance of community engagement and to see how it can be promoted. Research can help identify the best ways of backgrounding these unproductive models and helping the public and practitioners see how engagement with community organizations and members can be facilitated.

Addressing these challenges will require communications tools of varying types. Values are likely needed to orient people toward equity and promote a sense of collective responsibility for supporting engagement for all families in all

communities. Explanatory tools—such as explanatory metaphors, explanatory chains, and examples—are needed to expand people’s understanding of what engagement is, how it works, and how policies can facilitate it. Exemplar policies may be useful in generating a recognition of what truly prioritizing engagement would require. And messengers may be valuable in helping people recognize the crucial roles played by each party—family, school, and community—and the assets that each bring to engagement. Further research is needed to develop and test these types of communications tools.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this report indicate that family, school, and community engagement advocates face significant challenges in communicating with the public and practitioners. And while the overlap between policymakers and experts is quite encouraging, the gaps that do exist between them clearly undermine uptake of the field's recommendations.

The cultural models findings presented in this report map out the terrain that communicators must navigate. By understanding where there are pitfalls in public, practitioner, and policymaker thinking, communicators can steer clear of misunderstandings and resistance. And by knowing where the terrain is more easily navigable—where people's existing ways of thinking are more hospitable—communicators can more easily get their messages across.

The provisional communications recommendations provided here can help begin to shift public, practitioner, and policymaker thinking on this issue. While further research is needed to identify a comprehensive reframing strategy, these recommendations can be used to start pushing the conversation around family, school, and community engagement in the right direction.

Appendix: Research Methods and Demographics

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

To explore experts' knowledge about the core principles of family, school, and community engagement, FrameWorks conducted 13 one-on-one, one-hour phone interviews with participants whose expertise included research, practice, and policy. Interviews were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees, who reflected a diversity of perspectives and areas of expertise, in collaboration with the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings about what family, school, and community engagement is, what factors facilitate or obstruct engagement, what the effects of engagement are, how productive engagement can be fostered, and what policies should be adopted to support engagement. In each conversation, the researcher used a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios to challenge experts to explain their research, experience, and perspectives; break down complicated relationships; and simplify complex concepts. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to pre-set questions, researchers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification, and encouraged experts to expand upon concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.^{7,8} Researchers categorized common themes from each interview and also incorporated negative cases into the overall findings within each category. This procedure resulted in a refined set of themes, which researchers supplemented with a review of materials from relevant literature.

CULTURAL MODELS INTERVIEWS

The cultural models findings presented in this report are based on a set of interviews with members of the public, education practitioners, and state- and federal-level policymakers. To understand these groups' thinking about family, school, and community engagement, FrameWorks conducted 10 in-person, in-depth interviews with members of the public in March 2017 in Chicago, IL, and Charleston, SC. Frameworks also conducted 10 Skype and telephone interviews with K-12 education practitioners from Prince George's County, MD, and West Fargo, ND, and with early childhood practitioners working in Head Start programs in a number of towns and districts in Mississippi, between September and December 2017. Frameworks also conducted telephone interviews with three federal-level education policymakers, and six chief state school officers between September 2017 and February 2018.

Cultural models interviews—one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours—allow researchers to capture the broad sets of assumptions, or cultural models, which participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area. These interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues—in this case, issues related to family, school, and community engagement. Interviews covered thinking about education in broad terms before turning to a discussion of engagement specifically. The interviews touched on what members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers think engagement is, how and why it occurs, its effects, and what can be done to foster and support it.

The goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models that participants in all three groups use to make sense of family, school, and community engagement. Therefore, researchers gave participants the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant. Researchers approached each interview with a set of topics to cover but left the order in which these topics were addressed largely to participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' written consent.

By including a range of people, researchers could identify cultural models that represent shared patterns of thinking among members of the public, practitioners, and policymakers. Participants in the interviews with the public were recruited by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, residential location, educational background (as a proxy for socio-economic status), political views (as self-reported during the screening process), religious involvement, and family situation (e.g., married, single, with children, without children, age of children). Participants for the education practitioners and policymaker interviews were recruited in assistance from the National Association of Family, School, and Community Engagement.

Findings are based on an analysis of these 29 interviews. To analyze the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how members of each of the three groups sampled understood issues related to family, school, and community engagement.⁹

First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's talk and across the set of interviews. In short, the analysis involved patterns discerned from both what was said (i.e., how things were related, explained, and understood) and what was not said (i.e., assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the conflicting ways of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other, in the sense that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking.

Analysis centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants within each sample. Cultural models research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. It is not designed to identify differences in the understandings of various demographic, ideological, or regional groups (which would be an inappropriate use of this method and its sampling frame).

Endnotes

1. Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). Culture and Cognition. In *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (pp. 3–40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. It is worth noting that the practitioner and policymaker interviews were slightly shorter than interviews with the public and devoted less time to exploring participants' thoughts about families generally. This explains, in part, why we only found one model of family in interviews with practitioners and policymakers—only the most dominant model came through in the brief time devoted to the topic. If these interviews had spent more time on this topic, we might have identified other, more recessive models as well, including, perhaps, some of the other models held by the public.

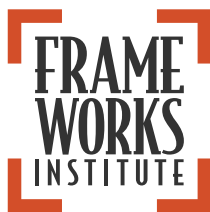
“Total Parenthood” is an extension of Wolf’s conception of “total motherhood”, in which motherhood is “a moral code in which mothers are exhorted to optimize every dimension of children’s lives, beginning in the womb” (p. 615). Wolf, J. B. (2007). Is breast really best? Risk and total motherhood in the national breastfeeding awareness campaign. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 32(4), 595–636. And “intensive motherhood,” which Hays (p.8) defines as a “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” form of mothering in which mothers are primarily responsible for children’s nurturance and development and their needs take precedence over the mother’s. In this case, participants talked about both parents being primarily responsible, hence the non-gendered terminology. Hays, S. (1996). *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Practitioners often applied the model in a more nuanced way than members of the public, including paraprofessionals and other classroom-level educators in their discussion. So for practitioners, “classroom educators” (rather than “teachers”) is a more precise way of describing that leg of the triad.
4. This may at least partly be due to the fact that our cultural model interviews with the public took place in urbanized, racially segregated locations, while a number of the practitioners we interviewed came from a more rural and less racially and socioeconomically diverse state.
5. Although participants did not explicitly discuss the culture of poverty in racialized terms, the underlying assumption is that these “bad values” and violent pathologies are especially apparent in poor communities of color. For an example of the ways in which culture of poverty arguments are racialized, see Lamont, M. & Small, M.L. (2008). How culture matters: Enriching our understanding of poverty. In A.C. Lin & D.R. Harris (Eds.), *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*. New York: Russell Sage.

6. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
7. Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
8. Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

ABOUT THE FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

The FrameWorks Institute is a think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, build public will, and further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children's issues and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth, ranging from qualitative, quantitative and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks® and in-depth study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative & Effective Institutions.

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