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Building Bridges: Family Engagement Approaches Among Transitional Kindergarten Teachers (Part 4)

Executive Summary

The Universal Transitional Kindergarten (UTK) policy is fundamental to California's extensive initiatives to improve early childhood education through the Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program. As the state advances towards ensuring early childhood education is accessible to all 4-year-olds by 2026, the involvement of educators in the initial execution of UTK is crucial. This research brief examines the current perceptions of transitional kindergarten (TK) educators in California regarding the efficacy of various family engagement practices and identifies the specific supports that may be needed to enhance their ability to address academic, social, and emotional needs in students.

Conducted as part of a longitudinal mixed-method study, the data were collected from 143 UTK teachers across 45 school districts during the 2022–2023 school year. Key findings highlight strong support for practices that enhance collaboration, communication, and inclusivity within the educational environment. Educator responses regarding collaborative practices highlight the effectiveness of key strategies such as positive reinforcement, validation and support in recognizing parental efforts and contributions, open communication, collaborative goal setting, and cultural sensitivity, with almost all items being rated as somewhat to very effective by over 90% of the educators.

The findings from this research highlight the critical role of inclusivity, accessibility, validation, and open communication in enhancing parental and educator engagement. Strategies that emphasize collaboration, respect, and cultural sensitivity are particularly effective in fostering strong partnerships between parents and educators, ultimately contributing to improved educational experiences and outcomes for children.

Overall, these insights provide valuable guidance for developing and implementing initiatives that support and enhance parental involvement and educator collaboration within the early childhood educational landscape.

Key Terms

► Family Engagement

A collaborative partnership between families and educational institutions, dedicated to supporting children's learning and development in meaningful ways (IRIS Center, n.d.). Key aspects of this shared responsibility include facilitating family members' educational participation, understanding family dynamics, building positive relationships, and creating meaningful opportunities for family involvement (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, n.d.).

Background

Acknowledging the significance of early childhood education in mitigating achievement disparities (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013), numerous states across the U.S. are advancing towards the establishment of UPK programs, aiming to ensure accessibility to early childhood education for all children, irrespective of family income (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). California has implemented the UTK policy as a fundamental aspect of the broader UPK effort, with the objective of providing equitable and inclusive education for all 4-year-olds by 2026 (California School Boards Association, n.d.).

With the rising emphasis on early childhood education through policies like California's UTK initiative, examining TK teachers' family engagement practices becomes essential. Parents are a child's first educators and are regarded as the "primary engine" of development in early childhood

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011), with educators, researchers, and policy-makers long advocating for greater efforts to engage parents in their children's education and stating that greater parent participation would improve child academic and social outcomes (Garbacz et al., 2017). Consistent with prior research (Mapp & Hong, 2010), we believe school outreach to families should focus on equitable strategies that all families can access and reflect the myriad ways families with diverse values, expectations, and beliefs are supporting their children, especially given the historical significance of inviting families to engage in school events or meetings (Walker et al., 2005).

Evidence points to the importance of extending invitations to families to participate in school events or meetings (Walker et al., 2005) and to the fact that families often wait for school personnel to initiate contact. Thus, a focus on seeking out families is appropriate (Eagle & Dowd-Eagle, 2012). Consistent with others (Mapp & Hong, 2010), we believe school outreach to families should focus on equitable strategies that all families can access and reflect the myriad ways families with diverse values, expectations, and beliefs are supporting their children.

Given that UTK aims to provide equitable early education access (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022; Oliveira, 2024; Ishimaru, 2019), understanding how teachers perceive existing family engagement methods can highlight the gaps and strengths in current practices. By examining these factors, constituents can identify areas where educators perceive they may need additional resources or support and ensure they are well-equipped to engage and collaborate successfully with families to build resilient, supportive environments for children facing challenges.

Main Research Aims

What factors influence educators’ effectiveness in utilizing family engagement strategies to support the development and learning of children in the classroom?

- 1. Investigate how confident educators feel in their ability to effectively use various family engagement strategies, focusing on practices that foster positive relationships and collaboration with families to support children’s learning and development.
- 2. Explore educators’ perspectives on the diverse needs and preferences of families, focusing on how these insights can inform more effective and tailored engagement strategies that support student success.

Overview of Survey and Interview

Survey and interview data come from the first wave of a three-year longitudinal mixed-method study exploring TK teachers’ experiences during the ongoing implementation of the UPK policy in California. We recruited participants through UC Berkeley in collaboration with 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy), which provides outreach efforts to school districts in the state. To qualify for the study, participants needed to be working with 4-year-old children in a TK setting.

To investigate TK teachers’ use of family engagement strategies, participants were asked to provide their perceptions in various engagement practices with families of children in their classrooms. The survey included questions regarding their confidence in making validating statements about parents’ efforts, commenting on the strengths of families and children, and collaborating with parents to set mutual goals for student development. Educators were also prompted to share how often they encouraged parental participation in classroom activities, utilized families’ preferred languages for communication, and engaged in open, two-way information sharing. Additionally, the survey sought to identify educators’ insights into family needs and preferences, including the types of resources and information they provide to support families in their child’s learning.

Demographic Information of Survey Participants

Data were collected from teachers working with 4-year-olds in TK classrooms across approximately 45 school districts in California between April 2023 and August 2023, which was during the first school year (2022–2023) of UPK policy implementation in California. The sample comprised a total of 143 TK teachers (97.2% female, 2.1% male, 0.7% non-binary). The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 68, with an average age of 45.1. Educators worked in predominantly urban settings, with 42.7%

Figure 1
Distribution of Pre-K–12 vs. TK Teaching Experience Among TK Teachers

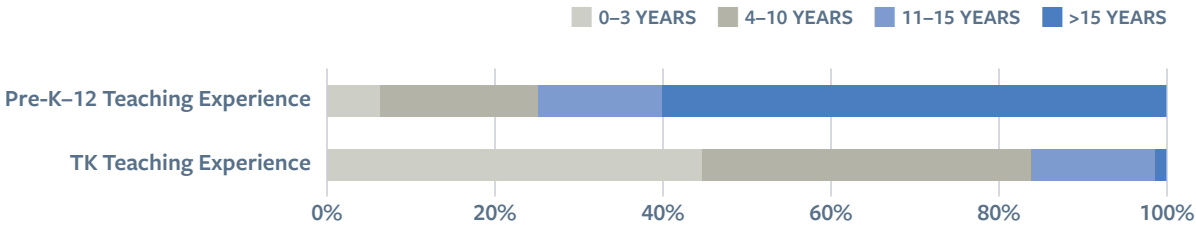


Figure 2

Efficacy of Resource Provisioning in Fostering Family Engagement: TK Teacher Perceptions by Race/Ethnicity



working at schools in cities and 39.9% in suburban areas, while only 8.4% worked in towns and 9.1% were in rural schools, as classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt & Maselli, 2024). Regarding racial and ethnic backgrounds, the breakdown was as follows: 67.1% Caucasian/White, 18.9% Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican, 5.6% Asian/Asian American, 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 7.7% identifying as Other.¹ As shown in Figure 1, our participants' years employed suggest that a substantial portion of teachers have less experience in TK compared to their overall pre-K–12 teaching experience.

TK Teachers' Views on Resource Provision Efficacy

Quality family engagement practices should include exploring families' perceptions of their role in their children's education, their beliefs about their personal knowledge, and providing resources and supportive tools to the families (Halgunseth et al., 2009; Summer & Summer, 2014).

As shown in Figure 2, with some variability in their perceived efficacy regarding resource provision to support family engagement, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander TK teachers reported the highest levels of perceived efficacy (4.2), while Hispanic/Latino/a/e/Mexican TK teachers reported the lowest (3.55).

As shown in Figure 3, when surveyed on their perspectives regarding the efficacy of providing resources for family engagement practices, approximately 89% of educators indicated varying degrees of belief in the effectiveness of these resources. Notably, 27% of teachers reported that providing resources was very effective, 38% considered it to be effective, and 24% believed it was somewhat effective in fostering family engagement.

Educators hold strong foundational beliefs in the effectiveness of providing opportunities to engage families in the school environment, including tailored materials, accessible resources, and inclusive activities to foster meaningful participation

¹ Other applies to teachers who self-identified as mixed, biracial, or multiracial (encompassing multiple ethnicities). The absence of Black/African American teachers in this dataset is a critical limitation. Given the unique perspectives and cultural contributions of Black educators, their absence may limit the generalizability of these findings. Caution is advised when interpreting results, as they may not fully reflect the experiences of a racially diverse teaching workforce.

Figure 3

Efficacy of Resource Provisioning in Fostering Family Engagement: Distribution of TK Teacher Perceptions

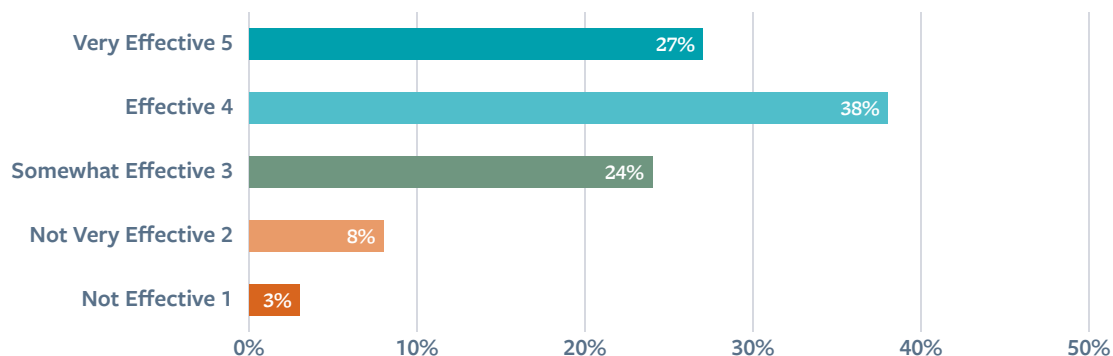
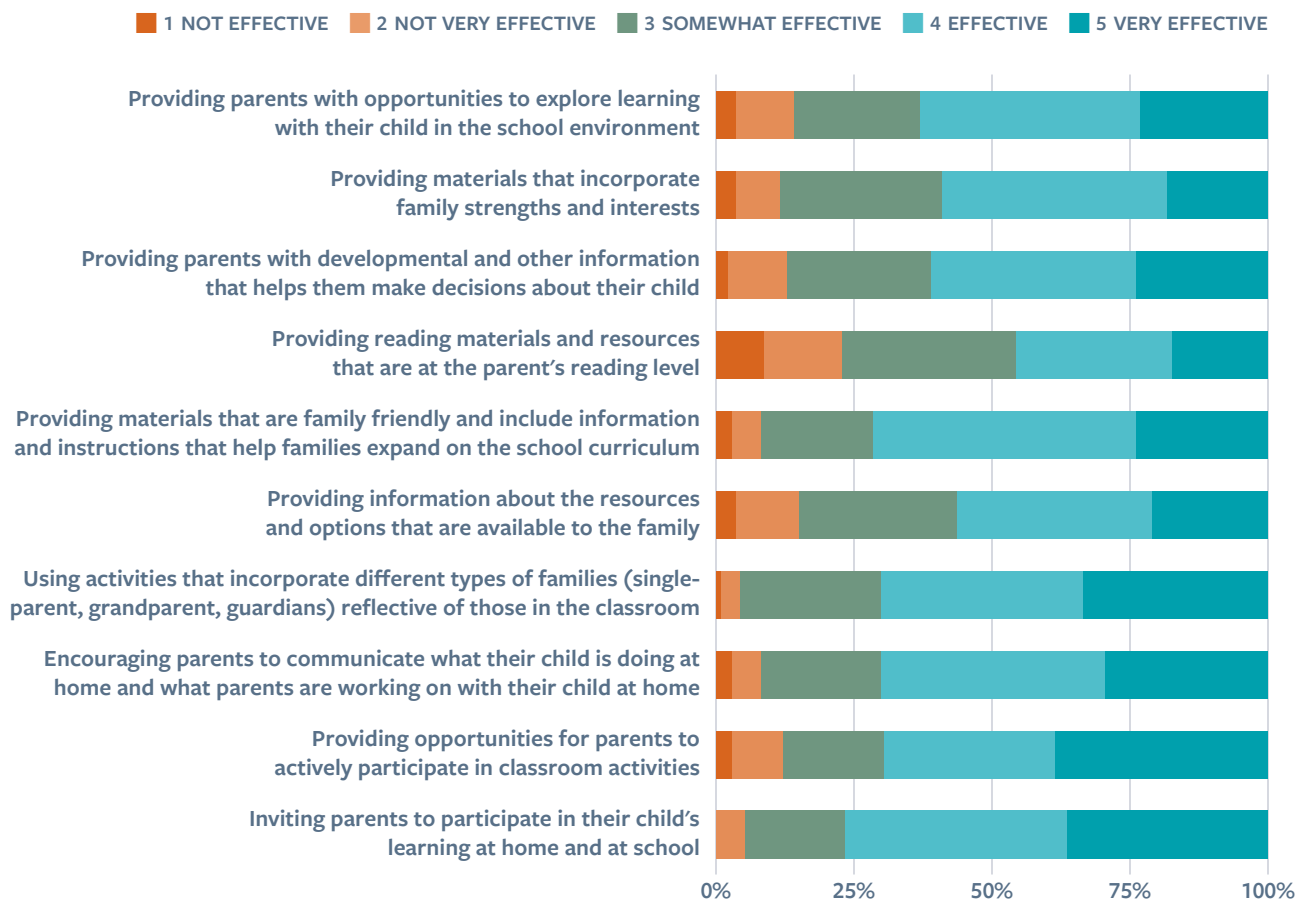


Figure 4

Efficacy of Resource Provisioning in Fostering Family Engagement: Item-Level Distribution of TK Teacher Perceptions



in improving students' outcomes in schools. As shown in Figure 4, for example, providing materials that incorporate family strengths and interests were positively received by 88.7% of educators, highlighting the importance of tailoring programs to families' unique needs. Efforts to provide parents with developmental and other decision-making information about their child were also well-received. Providing reading materials and resources at the parent's reading level received slightly less positive feedback, indicating that just under a quarter of educators seek room for improvement in accessibility. Family-friendly materials designed to extend the school curriculum were particularly well-received, emphasizing their cruciality to educators. Opportunities for parents to actively participate in classroom activities were also highly rated.

Similarly, 85.8% of educators expressed varying levels of agreement in the effectiveness of providing parents with the opportunities to explore learning with their child in the school environment. Additionally, offering families information about available resources and options was considered effective by 85.2% of educators. Inclusive activities reflecting the diversity of families in the classroom, such as those involving single-parent or grandparent-led households, were met with strong support, with less than 5% of educators rating them as not very effective or not effective. Encouraging parents to communicate about their child's activities and progress at home was also highly valued, with about 92% of educators rating these initiatives as effective to varying extents, underscoring the importance of fostering open communication. Finally, initiatives that invite parents to engage in their child's learning at home and school received some of the highest ratings, highlighting the importance of collaborative learning opportunities.

Overall, these findings emphasize the importance of initiatives that promote meaningful family

participation, clear communication, and inclusivity. Educators find programs that focus on tailored materials, accessible resources, and celebrating family diversity are particularly effective. However, attention should also be directed toward engaging educators who may rate initiatives as somewhat effective or lower (not very effective and not effective), particularly in areas regarding accessibility, ensuring that resources are effectively communicated and adapted to meet the diverse needs of all families.

TK Teachers' Views on Effective Collaboration

Strong partnerships between early childhood educators and families can increase parents' confidence and ability to assist their children's learning (Levickis et al., 2023). Strong parent-educator relationships can be especially important for disadvantaged families; for example, a study of low-income parents and their preschool children found a link between parents' perceptions of parent-educator communication and the home learning environment (Lin et al., 2019).

As shown in Figure 5, with minimal variability in their perceived efficacy regarding collaborative practices to support family engagement, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander TK teachers reported the highest levels of perceived efficacy, while Asian/Asian American TK teachers reported the lowest. All teachers averaged at approximately a 3.99 (on a 5 point scale) in perceived efficacy.

As shown in Figure 6, when asked about their perspectives regarding the efficacy of family-educator partnerships, an overwhelming majority of educators (96%) indicated varying degrees of belief in the effectiveness of collaborative practices. Specifically, 28% of teachers reported that providing resources was very effective, 46% considered it to

Figure 5

Efficacy of Collaborative Practices in Fostering Family Engagement: TK Teacher Perceptions by Race/Ethnicity



be effective, and 22% believed it was somewhat effective in fostering family engagement.

As shown in Figure 7, predominantly positive responses from educators to various collaborative family engagement practices, such as validating parents' efforts, mutual goal-setting, respectful communication, and flexible information sharing, underscores the significance of these strategies in fostering strong interpersonal relationships with families within school communities. All educators believed that communicating the strengths, accomplishments, and positive aspects of the family and child to the parents was a compelling strategy to encourage collaboration in promoting student learning. Likewise, working together with parents to set mutual goals for their children was well-received. Making validating statements about parents' efforts and challenges was also rated positively, indicating that educators recognize the importance of affirming parental contributions. Asking parents about their efforts to meet their children's goals received slightly lower ratings. Offering parents opportunities to problem-solve alongside educators was also perceived slightly less positively.

Listening to parents and providing the minimum amount of structure needed for them to provide information was rated highly positively, emphasizing the value of clear and concise communication. Engaging parents in frequent and open two-way communication was particularly well-regarded, reflecting the importance of fostering ongoing dialogue. Communicating respect and accepting parents' opinions received similarly strong support, with nearly all educators considering this practice effective. Additionally, communicating with families in their preferred format was considered effective, underscoring the importance of affirming families' communication preferences. Communicating and providing materials in families' native languages received positive feedback but also highlighted an area for improvement; 9.8% of educators rated it as not very effective and 2.8% of educators found it not effective at all, signaling opportunities to improve accessibility.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the value educators place on collaborative practices, respectful communication, and tailored resources in fostering family engagement. While almost all strategies were rated as effective or very effective, areas

Figure 6

Efficacy of Collaborative Practices in Fostering Family Engagement: Distribution of TK Teacher Perceptions

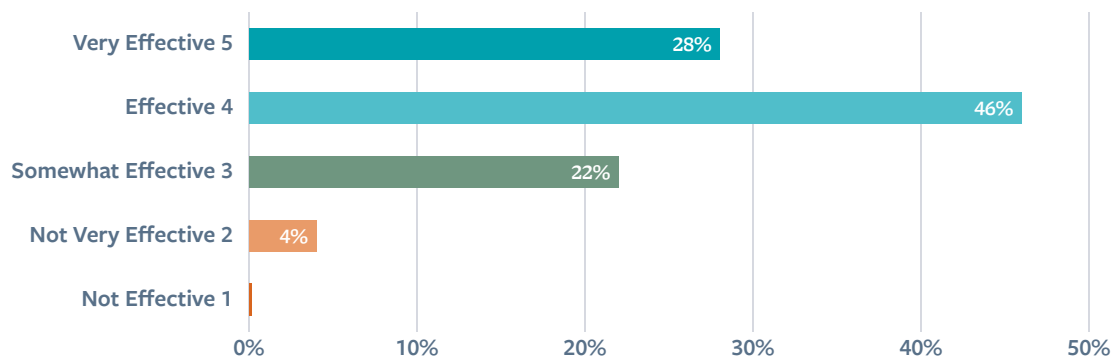
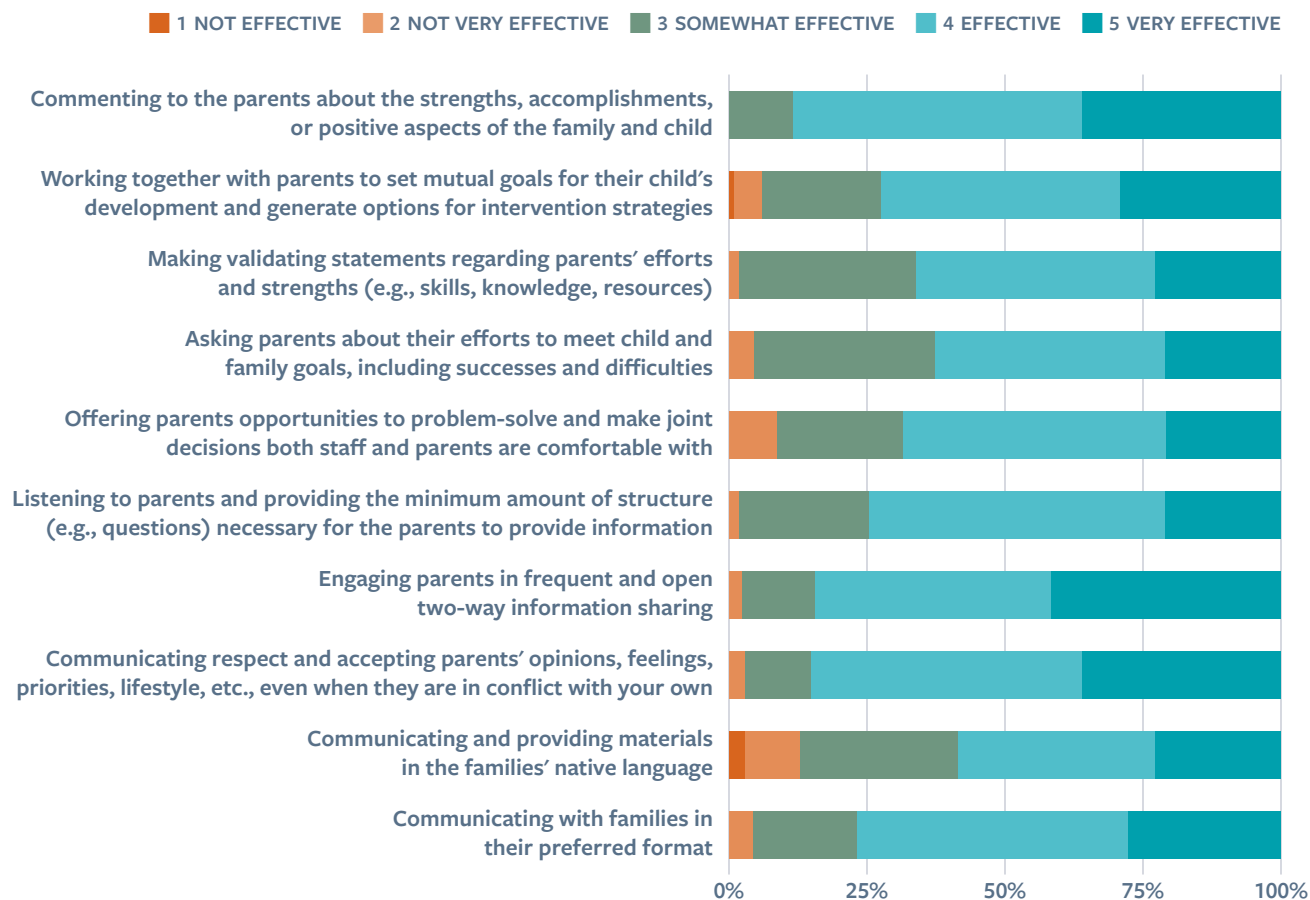


Figure 7

Efficacy of Collaborative Practices in Fostering Family Engagement: Item-Level Distribution of TK Teacher Perceptions



such as problem-solving opportunities and material accessibility present opportunities for improvement. Strengthening these areas will help ensure that family engagement efforts are inclusive, impactful, and adaptable to the diverse needs of school communities.

Conclusions

The analysis of educator responses reveals a strong endorsement for strategies that enhance parental engagement in children's education. Key initiatives, such as commenting on the strengths and accomplishments of families and children, validating parental efforts, and engaging in open and reciprocal communication, received overwhelmingly positive feedback. These findings underscore the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that values and respects parental contributions.

The data also highlight the effectiveness of collaborative approaches, where educators work together with parents to set mutual goals and generate intervention strategies. This, along with providing family-friendly materials and opportunities for problem-solving, further emphasizes the critical role of active and participatory engagement in promoting educational outcomes.

Moreover, the emphasis on cultural sensitivity, as evidenced by the positive responses to communication in the families' native language and preferred format, reinforces the need for adaptable and respectful communication practices.

Overall, the results suggest that strategies focused on inclusivity, accessibility, validation, and open communication are particularly effective in enhancing parental involvement and support. These insights can guide future efforts to develop and implement initiatives that foster stronger parent-educator partnerships, ultimately contributing to improved educational experiences and outcomes for children.

Key Takeaways

Resource Provision and Efficacy

- The analysis of the positive response rates to various parental engagement strategies demonstrates the efficacy of these initiatives. Notably, 95.8% of educators indicated that activities incorporating different types of families (e.g., single-parent, grandparent, guardians) reflective of those in the classroom were effective to varying degrees. Similarly, a significant proportion of educators (95%) endorsed the invitation for parents to participate actively in their child's learning at home and school, highlighting the critical role of collaborative educational practices.
- Moreover, the provision of family-friendly materials, which 92.2% of educators described as effective in varying levels, was identified as an essential factor in helping families build upon the school curriculum. This initiative, coupled with encouraging parental communication about their child's activities at home (92.2% of educators rated it as somewhat to very effective), underscores the importance of effective communication and resource accessibility in promoting parental involvement. Additionally, the strategies aimed at catering to family strengths and interests (88.7%) and providing reading materials suitable for the parent's reading level (77.5%) were also highly regarded. These findings suggest that tailored materials play a pivotal role in empowering families to engage more effectively in their child's educational journey.
- Schools seeking to enhance parent engagement should continue to prioritize initiatives that foster meaningful participation, clear communication, and inclusivity by tailoring materials to families' unique needs, providing accessible resources, and recognizing family diversity. The majority

Strategies focused on inclusivity, accessibility, validation, and open communication are particularly effective in enhancing parental involvement and support.

of educators rated these strategies as effective or very effective, reflecting their importance in fostering collaboration and improving student outcomes. However, areas such as accessibility of materials and outreach to less-engaged families present opportunities for growth. Addressing these gaps can enhance the impact of family engagement efforts and ensure they meet the diverse needs of all families.

Collaboration

► The analysis of educator responses highlights the effectiveness of various parent engagement strategies. Notably, 100% of educators rated the practice of commenting to parents about the strengths, accomplishments, or positive aspects of the family and child as being effective to varying degrees. This underscores the importance of positive reinforcement in building strong parent-educator relationships.

► Furthermore, 98.7% of educators found making validating statements regarding parents' efforts and strengths to be effective. This approach, coupled with 95.9% of educators rating "asking parents about their efforts to meet child and family goals, including successes and difficulties" as somewhat effective to very effective, emphasizes the value of recognizing and supporting parental contributions.

► Engaging parents in frequent and open two-way information sharing was rated as effective by 98% of educators, while 98.6% of educators endorsed, to varying degrees, listening to parents and providing minimal structure necessary for effective communication. These findings highlight the significance of open and reciprocal communication in fostering collaborative partnerships.

► Additionally, 94.5% of educators rated working together with parents to set mutual goals for their child's development and generating options for intervention strategies as effective. This collaborative approach is further supported by the 92.5% approval for offering parents opportunities to problem-solve and make joint decisions that both staff and parents are comfortable with. Communicating respect and accepting parents' opinions, feelings, priorities, and lifestyle, even when they conflict with the educator's own, was rated positively by 97.3% of educators. Moreover, communicating and providing materials in the families' native language (87.5% of educators) and communicating with families in their preferred format (95.9% of educators) were also highly regarded as effective practices. These practices underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in parent-educator interactions.

► Educators overwhelmingly recognize the importance of collaborative family engagement

practices, including mutual goal-setting, validating parental efforts, respectful communication, and two-way information sharing, in building strong relationships with families. These practices were largely rated as effective or very effective, with particularly high support for frequent and open communication and respecting parents' opinions. However, opportunities for growth exist in areas such as improving accessibility of family-friendly materials, enhancing problem-solving initiatives, and better tailoring communication to meet families' needs. By addressing these gaps, schools can further strengthen family-school relationships and create more inclusive, impactful engagement strategies.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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