

# How State Leaders Can Promote Meaningful Family Engagement at the State and Program Level

Brief | February 2021

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*This brief provides an overview of research-based practices and policies that state leaders can use to support meaningful family engagement in children's early learning, which ultimately improves child and family outcomes. State leaders' actions can influence family engagement at both the state and program levels.*

A family's engagement in their child's early learning can lead to long-term success for the child. This can take the form of program-level advocacy where parents or guardians are involved in decision-making at their child's program and learn the skills to strengthen the connection between the provider and home. State leaders are in a unique position to enact policies that bolster family engagement at the program level. Similarly, states can take steps towards systematically including family voice in the development of statewide early learning policies.

Implementing strong family engagement practices not only supports the well-being of children but their families too. At the program level, a two-generation approach is often used to offer services to children and their families from the same point of access. When doing this, programs can learn directly from families about their needs and involve them in decision-making. At the state level, including families in the process of creating early learning policy, programs, and initiatives can bolster inclusion, equity, and efficacy of services.

## Federal Statutes and Policies Requiring Family Engagement

Family engagement requirements are included in many [federal statutes and policies](#) that govern early childhood education systems. Specifically, family engagement is built into the Head Start Act, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA [Parts B and C]), the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (HHS & ED, 2016). These policies and the tools developed to support them may be useful models to states when building their own family engagement policies and strategies.

## Evidence-Based Strategies for Promoting Family Engagement

Researchers have identified [key strategies](#) states can use to support early childhood education programs and families in successfully meeting these requirements. State leaders can implement these strategies to support the building and sustaining of partnerships with families at the program and state level that carry throughout the span of a child's education. These strategies (Stark, 2010) include:



- Using a broad and inclusive definition of “family engagement” to promote the participation of all types of families. State definitions of a family should include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents and other relatives; and legal and informal guardians.
- Requiring state-funded early childhood programs to create, implement, and monitor family engagement programs
- Appointing a leader at the state level who oversees, supports, and expands opportunities for family engagement
- Confirming that family engagement is included as a core competency in preparation and certification for teachers and administrators
- Providing families with sufficient resources and information to fully participate in children’s development and learning
- Requiring at least one in-person conference and one home visit for each family enrolled in an early childhood program
- Including families, or representations of families’ perspectives, on advisory councils
- Requiring the development and implementation of kindergarten transition plans

### State Spotlight: Washington

When Washington state created their new Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) in 2017, they included specific language in their founding legislation to ensure families would be engaged:

*“The department’s programs shall be designed in a way the respects and preserves the ability of parents and legal guardians to direct the education, development, and upbringing of their children, and that recognizes and honors cultural and linguistic diversity. The department shall include parents and legal guardians in the development of policies and program decisions affecting their children.”*

(RCW 43.216.020)

This legislation gave DCYF the charge to build programs around the principles of family engagement. Soon after its enactment, DCYF created a [Parent Advisory Group](#) (PAG). This group is made up of parents and family caregivers of children birth through 9 years old. DCYF is careful to ensure the PAG includes parents from diverse backgrounds, including families that can speak to the experiences of:

- Dual language learners
- Children with varying developmental and special needs
- Families impacted by incarceration

- Rural and remote communities
- Tribal communities

The PAG has since advised DCYF on Washington's Early Learning Plan, Child Care and Development Fund plan, and Early Achievers (WA's Quality Rating and Improvement System), among others.

Washington has also written family engagement into their state-funded preschool program, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). All ECEAP classrooms are required to offer [Mobility Mentoring®](#), an evidence-based family engagement approach designed to support planning and decision-making that assists families living in poverty.

To improve access to local family services, Washington state and community partners have implemented the [Help Me Grow](#) program to create centralized locations for families to access available resources and information.

## Barriers to Fostering Family Engagement

Researchers have also identified common barriers to fostering effective family engagement. These barriers (HHS & ED, 2016) include:

- A perception that family engagement practices are supplemental, rather than necessary
- A lack of requirements or official guidance that drive or support systemic approaches to building family engagement
- A lack of diverse staff or training around culturally and linguistically appropriate practices enabling programs to connect with families
- A lack of investment or insufficient resources put into developing partnerships with diverse organizations and family leaders
- A lack of professional learning around family engagement practices

## Problem-Solving to Overcome Barriers and Enhance Family Engagement

Incorporating family engagement practices at the state level can be challenging, but many state leaders have taken large strides to systematically incorporate family engagement into their work.

**Leaders at state early childhood agencies can:**

- **Establish robust family engagement practices**

State agencies can develop comprehensive family engagement frameworks in partnership with stakeholders that are rooted in research.

The **Michigan** Department of Education, in partnership with their Family Engagement Stakeholder's Committee, developed a comprehensive [Family Engagement Framework](#). This framework creates clear expectations for family engagement in early care and education settings as well as K-12 settings. The document provides guided space for programs, schools, and districts to develop their own action plans and accountability measures.

- **Recruit diverse parent voices, recognizing that “family” looks different for everyone**

To bolster the voices of all parents, state leaders should recruit diverse families including, but not limited to, those that have nontraditional structures, speak a language other than English, have children with disabilities, are experiencing homelessness, are affected by incarceration, live in rural or remote communities, are from tribal communities, and/or are facing economic insecurity.

The RAND Corporation created a toolkit: [Five Strategies for Successful Recruitment and Retention of Children and Families in Human Service Programs](#) that can be useful for states or early childhood education and child care programs with considerations, checklists, and resources to:

- conduct outreach
- develop and maintain relationships
- design infrastructure and procedures that consider families' needs
- engage and support families
- continuously monitor family enrollment and retention and quality of services

- **Reduce financial barriers to families' participation**

Families may find participation in parent advisory groups at the local and state level to be costly due to travel, child care costs, and time spent away from work. State leaders can make participation more feasible for families by providing financial supports such as stipends, vouchers, or reimbursements.

The **Connecticut** Office of Early Childhood implements a [Two-Generational \(2Gen\) Initiative](#) that includes an advisory board of parents who contribute to the development of the state's 2Gen policies and programs. Connecticut has protected parent involvement on this board by securing compensation for their time. [Senate Bill No.1080](#) allows family participants to be compensated for their time and travel using available appropriations. Connecticut has also established a strong partnership with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to financially support their 2Gen work.

Some questions that state early childhood agency leaders can consider when procuring funding for this work are:

- What are the options for a reliable funding source?

- What are the regulations of the state procurement office?
- Does the funding source allow for monetary incentives?
- What incentives are meaningful for the family participants?
- Are there opportunities for external partnerships to support the cost of trainings, travel, or refreshments?

- **Prepare parents to participate in shaping state policy and programs**

Parents and guardians know their children, but the world of early learning policy and practices might be new to them. State leaders can provide family members with leadership training to give them the tools to best participate in advisory groups and advocate for their communities.

**Illinois** recently established a [Family Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) as part of their Early Learning Council (ELC) to systemically incorporate parent voice into the state early childhood systems. They plan to provide ongoing professional development to all FAC members that includes an overview of Illinois's early childhood systems and trainings on leadership, advocacy, and meeting facilitation. In addition to preparing the FAC parent leaders to work within the ELC, the ELC committee co-chairs are actively working toward making adjustments that encourage intentional and sustained parent engagement within the various committees of the Council.

- **Support family engagement in local communities**

State leaders can enact policies that fund and support the operations of regional- and program-level family engagement opportunities.

**Oregon** passed legislation ([HB 2013](#)) in 2013 to establish [Early Learning Hubs](#). Today, there are 16 regional Hubs across the state that act as a single point of entry for families to access services related to child care, preschool, physical and mental health, housing, and K-12 education. Each Hub is required to have governance structures such as regular Parent Cafes, parent advisory councils, or a parent governing board in place to ensure they continue to meet the changing needs of families.

## References

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### Suggested APA 7 Citation:

Peyton, S. & deMonsabert, J. (2021). *How state leaders can promote meaningful family engagement at the state and program level*. SRI International.

This Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. Contract Number: HHSP2332015000411



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