



COMPANION BRIEF

Cultivating Caring Conditions: Creating Intentional District Systems for Authentic Family and Community Engagement in Schools

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Research has consistently demonstrated that family engagement in schools can result in positive academic and social outcomes for students (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Wood & Bauman, 2017). Effective practices for family engagement occur within schools when families are supported in helping their children academically and are connected to outreach programs and resources. Practices that support authentic engagement between families and schools often do not occur organically and must be developed and sustained through intentional processes and systems. In this audiocast, you will hear how the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district intentionally structured and aligned its systems to create inclusive, welcoming spaces that foster authentic family engagement.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has been implementing Dr. Karen Mapp's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) to support family engagement efforts across the district since 2021 to better support student success. As Molly, an instructional specialist with the Family and Community Engagement office, notes, "We know that the research shows family engagement is a leading indicator for our student success, not only in that K-12 space, but also in their postgraduate lives."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is a diverse school district located in Charlotte, North Carolina. The district covers more than 520 square miles of Mecklenburg County. It is the second largest district in the state, with 186 schools and more than 18,000 staff. The district serves a population of more than 140,000 students who represent over 150 countries of origin and speak over 200 languages.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools by the Numbers

District Details	
Number of Students	141,166
Number of Schools	186
Number of Staff	18,079

Note. NC School Report Card (2026): <https://ncfvapublicprod.ondemand.sas.com/src/district/600LEA/2025>; CMS District website (2026): <https://www.cmsk12.org/>

District Demographics	
American Indian/Alaska Native	<1%
Asian	7%
Black	33.8%
Hispanic	31.5%
White	23.6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%
Two or More Races	3.8%

Note. CMS Fast Facts: <https://www.cmsk12.org/technology-services/data>



Building Capacity for Meaningful Engagement

As captured in Dr. Mapp's [framework](#), effective family engagement is heavily dependent on the local context of a given school and its community. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework highlights the goals and conditions needed to create the types of effective family engagement that can lead to student achievement and school improvement.

Two types of conditions make up the framework's Essential Conditions: **process conditions** related to how schools and families engage with one another and **organizational conditions** related to how school systems prioritize and support family engagement efforts. Together, these conditions create an environment that supports effective family engagement across diverse school and community contexts. Efforts in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools provide a helpful illustration of how these conditions come to life in practice.

Process Conditions

According to the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, family engagement requires six *process* conditions. These conditions include having relational trust and being linked to learning, as well as being asset based, culturally responsive and respectful, collaborative, and interactive (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). The section that follows describes how the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district and schools are particularly strong in several of these conditions.

Relational Trust. School staff in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are dedicated to building and maintaining effective relationships with students and families. Building relational trust between home and school is critical. Research shows that the interpersonal dynamics between school staff, students, and families can impact school attendance and participation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Building trust can benefit both the schools and the family, as Joy, an advocate in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools system, notes: "When parents feel like they have a strong support system in their child's school, they're more receptive to share information about what's going on in their lives and will allow school staff the opportunity to assist them, giving them the support that they need."

The process of building and maintaining trust between schools and families can take forms both big and small.

As Melanee, a principal in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools system, notes, sometimes building relational trust is as simple as recognizing when students are showing up differently than they normally do: "If you see somebody coming down the hall and they're crying, then you're going to ask them what's wrong. If you see students who are showing up differently than they do regularly, then we can ask questions. We can engage when the kids come in and they're wearing tiaras because it's their birthday. We make sure that we acknowledge that something special is going on."



Asset Based. School and district staff in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools strive to focus on the contributions that families bring to their community. Research suggests that focusing on the strengths and assets that families bring to the school community—and not just on the challenges that these families encounter—creates the opportunity for stronger connections between home and school (Leo et al., 2019). In Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, this effort to be asset based has focused on empowering families with relevant skill-building opportunities, including parenting classes and support groups.

As the advocate Joy notes, this effort has helped create stronger and more nurturing school environments: “Family advocacy supports families and students by providing empowerment and skill building. By offering parenting classes, support groups and education on child development, we help our families build stronger nurturing environments.”

Culturally Responsive and Respectful. Staff across the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools district know that family engagement needs to be responsive and relevant to their families’ contexts. Research shows that for effective and inclusive family engagement to occur, educators must engage families in ways that are culturally responsive and sensitive to the power dynamics and lived experiences of their communities, especially as those lived experiences differ from their own (Leo et al., 2019). Creating culturally responsive and respectful school spaces through family engagement efforts can greatly contribute to the success of students.

As Melanee, the principal, notes, culturally responsive and respectful family engagement helps families feel valued, heard, and empowered: “Family engagement means creating authentic spaces that are culturally responsive, building partnerships between school and home where each of our families feels like they are respected, they’re valued, their voices are heard, and they’re empowered to be able to contribute to the success of their children.”

Collaborative. School and district staff in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are regularly engaging with families and communities across the region. Research suggests that family engagement that is authentically collaborative between schools and families has the potential to create stronger and more responsive change (Family Leadership Design Collaborative, 2019). This is because families and caregivers have invaluable insights into how their children learn and function in school. A collaborative partnership can be built by engaging families in the school’s processes and involving them in decision-making (Kea et al., 2025).

Family and community are considered essential contributors to student success in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools system, as Molly, an instructional specialist with the Family and Community Engagement office, notes: “We believe that our principals and teachers make the critical difference in student achievement in building a positive school community and that the school system, families, and community are necessary partners in ensuring the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success of all students.”



Organizational Conditions

According to the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, effective family engagement requires three *organizational* conditions to be effective. These include systemic, integrated, and sustained efforts across districts and schools.

Systemic initiatives must include a commitment across organizational leadership (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Perry & Geller, 2021). School and district leaders across Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have embraced the value of family engagement work across all levels of the organization.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has been intentional about helping school and district leaders throughout the system build their skills for engagement, notes Latisha, Director of Family and Community Engagement: “That’s one thing we’ve really been working with our district leaders, our school-based staff in understanding each component of [the Dual Capacity-Building] Framework so that we really can achieve that true home–school partnership.”

Integrated initiatives should be embedded across all district and school operations, including staff recruitment, professional development, strategic planning, and so on (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Perry & Geller, 2021).

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools district has been intentional about ensuring that family engagement efforts are incorporated into the district’s daily operations—including by embedding family engagement in the district’s strategic plan, as noted by Molly, the instructional specialist with the Family and Community Engagement office: “As we worked through making the districtwide [family engagement] approach, we were able to have the work of family engagement embedded into the strategic plan of the district to ensure within the theory of change that all schools were being supported in this work and all families had that equitable access.”

Sustained initiatives are those that are well resourced with funding, personnel, and infrastructure, as well as written policies and procedures (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Perry & Geller, 2021). Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, as a system, has consistently dedicated resources and staff to support effective family engagement.

As Molly, the instructional specialist with the Family and Community Engagement office, notes, the district embeds family engagement in existing professional development opportunities to ensure efficiency in using district and school resources: “Our professional development offerings ... [lay] the foundation for all of our schools to have that support, ensuring that the training and knowledge and best practices don’t sit in the central office. We want to make sure that our schools who are our most trusted source for our families understand the importance, understand the strategies and best practices so that they can serve as those best supports for our families on a day-to-day basis.”



Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has built an intentional, districtwide family and community engagement system that is grounded in research and the Dual Capacity-Building Framework. The district's approach embeds equitable policies, professional development, and district resources so that every school can create culturally responsive, welcoming environments for families. Through programs such as Family Academy and Family Portal and through school-based advocates and tailored school practices, the district connects families to supports, builds trust, and fosters authentic partnerships that can improve attendance, engagement, and student outcomes.

Listening Guide and Questions for Team Reflection

As you listen to the audiocast from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, notice how the participants describe the components of building strong family and community engagement, and consider what you might apply in your own school community. Some guiding questions for team reflection are offered below in boldface.

- Latisha, Director of Family and Community Engagement, says she sometimes walks through schools as if she were a newcomer—checking parking signs and front office “customer service” and checking whether families see people who look like them represented in the building. **If you did that kind of walk-through at your own school tomorrow, what would you notice?**
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has invested in a parent-facing education system as a way to support family learning and development through such means as its Family Academy, Family Academy on the Go, and Family Portal. The district's on-demand offerings are available in multiple languages to make information more accessible to families. **What does your district or school do to make sure family learning and engagement are accessible to the full community?**
- Latisha also describes an example of a single mother being partnered with a community organization at a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools engagement opportunity. This resulted in the mother obtaining a certification that enabled her to make a living wage—which has had a positive impact on her students' attendance and readiness to learn. **How might your school collaborate with your broader community to support student and family well-being?**
- Melanee says engagement “can’t be looked at as a one-size-fits-all mindset” given her school's diversity. **How do you currently tailor engagement to your community's particular culture(s) to honor and engage families' funds of knowledge?**



References

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