One thing I have learned from my years in education, as a teacher, administrator, and district-level supervisor, is that one size does not fit all. This is especially true of the way educators approach parent engagement. Parent engagement should be based on the unique needs and experiences of students and their families. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reflects the importance of empowering and engaging families. We as educators know that involving families is critical to improving achievement for all students, particularly those in high-need schools.

We must focus on opportunities—not obstacles—to accomplish this goal. Family structures have changed, so our parent engagement models should follow suit.

In supporting multiple schools within multiple communities, I have discovered and developed practices that encourage an outside-in approach—one that is driven by the communities I serve. Although parent
engagement in high-poverty schools is of the utmost importance, these practices are just as effective for other socioeconomic groups as well.

Transform Involvement to Engagement
Too often, educators deem parents "uninvolved" if they do not attend certain events. That correlation simply cannot be made. We should actively look for opportunities for engagement, opportunities to immerse and empower parents in their children’s learning process, and opportunities to recognize and celebrate this engagement. Giving parents the tools and resources to assist with schoolwork at home, providing them spaces in schools to use as resource centers, or even involving them in schoolwide expectation setting endeavors are just three examples of engagement practices.

Start Early
Why wait until the school year to get to know students and parents? Consider contacting students and their parents before school starts. Consider opportunities to bring new parents in to the school. Focus early outreach on relationship building, not information sharing. This will build trust and open those crucial lines of communication, which will be helpful in the future.

Rethink Parent Conferences
The traditional style of parent conferences relies heavily on information delivery, performance discussions, and grade distribution. Schools may want to explore the idea of “differentiation” and have conferences earlier in the school year so parents have an opportunity to showcase their children and provide teachers with insight into their interests and talents. This will provide teachers with powerful information that can drive their instruction. As the year progresses, teachers should continue to forge this collaborative relationship and empower parents as partners in the education process.

Redefine the Definition of Family
Recognizing diversity is also recognizing and honoring the familial structure and experiences of our students. For me personally, growing up as a child of teenage parents, I benefited from the support of my extended family. Parent attendance looked very different for me, and I couldn’t imagine having to explain to my teachers that activities may have to include an aunt, uncle, or a grandparent. We should abandon the idea that there is a “traditional” definition of family. Schools need to consider single-parent households, kinship care, same-sex parents, and other familial structures and use language that is inclusive of these types of families in invitations and correspondence so that anyone who loves and cares for the students feels welcome.

Avoid Assumptions and the Blame Game
Just as our students are diverse, so are their personal experiences. As humans, when experiences are different from our established frame of reference, we tend to draw conclusions. Often times, educators may assume that if a parent or guardian does not attend a conference or respond to an e-mail, it means that they don’t care. But we simply cannot continue to make this assumption; it leads us to blame the parent for students’ undesirable behaviors or poor grades and then abandon any efforts to reach out to
these families. Remember that parents and guardians are sending us their most precious possession; we must treat their children as such.

**Expand the School Walls**
The most effective models of parental engagement in schools are ones that take down the proverbial school walls. If we expect families to enter our doors, we, too, must feel comfortable extending ourselves into their neighborhoods and homes. If information isn’t getting into the parents’ hands, be the one that hands it to them. Think about how many more family members you could contact if you rode a bus home with your students and greeted parents at the stop to share information and invite them to events. Explore opportunities to host school events outside of the school. And be sure to have an open-door policy in your school, so parents know they are welcome any time.

When in doubt, ask. Ask parents how they would like information communicated to them or what things might limit their attendance at events. The answers may surprise you. Your school community may not welcome electronic communication, may want transportation to events, or may want you to host events at more mutual meeting places.

Consider the [ASCD Whole Child approach to education](https://www.ascd.org), which “ensures each child, in each school, in each community is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.” This approach can be extended to your work with families to help you strengthen connections. Engaging families is a vital element to student success. If we expect our impact on students to last beyond our six hours with them, we must come to the realization that we simply can’t do our jobs without parents and families.

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**Get More Tips**
Hear from teachers Angela Foreman, Jimmy Scarano, and Erin Klein as they share their favorite tips and strategies to engage parents and families in the latest episode of the Whole Child Podcast, “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Teachers Share Strategies to Engage Parents and Families.”

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**Laurie A. Namey** is a member of the ASCD Emerging Leader class of 2014 and currently serves as the supervisor of equity and cultural proficiency for Harford County (Md.) Public Schools. Harford County Public Schools is a diverse school system that serves over 5,000 employees and 30,000 students in 54 schools. Namey also is an instructor at Goucher College in Baltimore, where she teaches in the Graduate of Education program in the area of education of at-risk and diverse learners. During her tenure in Harford County Public Schools, she has also served as an assistant principal, behavior specialist, and English teacher. Connect with Namey on Twitter [@NameyEquityHCPS](https://twitter.com/NameyEquityHCPS).