



# Family Engagement: Learning with Families

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This paper aims to support policymakers in setting expectations for effective family engagement through policy and to equip them with best practices to support providers in implementation. An exploration of how policy, contextualized to Philadelphia, can promote strong family engagement across programs is first presented. This is followed by a strategies section that offers examples of how providers can put family engagement policies into practice. By reading and understanding the strategies, policymakers will be more informed and prepared to identify opportunities and barriers for providers as they craft policy and guidance. Additionally, the strategies and accompanying examples offer accessible information that policy makers can share with providers to demonstrate what meets expectations and to lessen the burden on providers expending time to find strategies.

Philadelphia's pre-k program, PHLpreK, identifies *parental engagement and a transition plan for kindergarten* as one of the markers of a quality pre-k program.<sup>i</sup> From a practical standpoint, this makes sense—after all, families are the constant as their child moves through formal and non-formal learning settings. Engaging them as partners in their child's education and preparing them for subsequent grade levels supports continuity. Research supports the importance of family engagement,<sup>1</sup> with findings indicating that it does indeed hold benefits for children across multiple domains. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report [Parent Engagement Practices Improves Outcomes for Preschool Children](#) concluded that:

- Programs that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships can reduce behavioral problems.
- Promoting home learning activities and effective teaching strategies can foster early learning.
- Strengthening parent-teacher partnerships can boost academic and social-emotional skill development.<sup>ii</sup>
- Emphasizing a child's physical health can aid healthy overall development.

<sup>i</sup>The terms *family engagement* and *parent engagement* are both found in the literature. To promote a definition that is inclusive of the configuration of all families, the term *family engagement* will be used in this paper.

An MDRC<sup>2</sup> review of family engagement research similarly finds that literacy and math skills in young children are positively related to family engagement and, promisingly, that guidance and supports geared towards caretakers can lead to more engagement with their children.<sup>iii</sup>

While family engagement may be welcomed in theory, perceptions and assumptions on how family engagement is defined, approached, and put in to action can differ both between and amongst policymakers and practitioners. This paper aims to present promising approaches for policy and includes examples from practice to inform an intentional, inclusive, actionable, and sustainable family engagement approach in PHLpreK.

### The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group states family engagement:

- Is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Is continuous across a child's life and entails enduring a commitment, but embracing changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.<sup>iv</sup>

## LANDSCAPE OF PHLpreK AND PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Key elements of family engagement can already be found in both state policies including [Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood](#), [Keystone STARS Quality Rating and Improvement System](#), professional policies including NAEYC and also in local Philadelphia policies.

Within PHLpreK, programs follow *Partnerships for Learning* of the [Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood](#), which highlights the importance of relationships and communication between the program and the family, promotes activities to build on family strengths in order to foster leadership, and advises peer-to-peer support. Those programs who enter the PHLpreK system as a STAR 3 or 4 in the Keystone STARS Quality Rating and Improvement System already attend to the *Partnerships with Families and Communities* section in its updated [Keystone STARS Performance Standards \(2017\)](#). PHLpreK programs who became a part

of the system without a STAR 3 or 4 must achieve this rating in 18 to 24 months from starting date. Many STAR 4 centers are NAEYC accredited and follow [NAEYC's](#) Standard 7 which focuses solely on family engagement.

The importance of family engagement was recognized early in PHLpreK programs. In fact, the FY2018 [Request for Qualifications](#) for PHLpreK, included the expectation that all programs would:

- Partner with families and caregivers to support their children's learning and development
  - Plan and implement regular communication with families and caregivers
  - Involve families and caregivers in setting educational goals for their children
- Support Kindergarten Transition
  - Plan and implement kindergarten transition by June 1 for all children who will turn five by September 1 of the following school year<sup>v</sup>

<sup>2</sup>MDRC (registered name) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization.

The Keystone STARS Program Performance Standards were revised in June 2017. In the new

system, there are four categories of standards – Staff Qualifications and Professional Development; Early Care and Education Program; Partnerships with Families and Communities; and Leadership and Management. At the STAR 3 and 4 levels, programs earn points by meeting different standards within each category. Under Partnerships with Families and Communities, a total of 20 points is available across nine standards. STAR 3 programs must earn at least 14 points and STAR 4 programs must have a minimum of 17 points. This document will identify specific standards that map onto practices discussed to highlight alignment.



## A VISION FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Although components are currently present, a stronger framework for family engagement is needed. Programs already implementing components of family engagement are at risk for approaching them as separate activities or just one more item on a checklist. PHLpreK policymakers should consider organizing and aligning these components into a cohesive framework that is guided by an overall vision with comprehensive goals for family engagement. This approach encourages programs to think about how activities support families in reaching goals rather than simply how it fulfills a family engagement requirement, it will also support maximization of points in the Partnerships with Families and Communities category in the Keystone STARS standards. An additional benefit is that an overarching framework or plan creates a common language across programs and supports practitioners in identifying appropriate and best practices that fit within this vision. Furthermore, this offers an opportunity for peer learning across programs as they are better positioned to share resources and training aligned with the vision.

Some states, such as [Maryland](#) and [Arkansas](#), have developed frameworks that cover early learning programs from birth through age eight. Cities and districts have also developed overarching plans or models for their programs. For example, in 2015-2016 Los Angeles' universal pre-k program, [LAUP](#), began using a model for family engagement based on the [Strengthening Families](#) approach, which is also promoted in the 2017 edition of the Keystone STARS Program Performance Standards (see FC 3.4.7). This approach has a goal of building five protective factors--parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children.<sup>vi</sup> An evaluation of LAUP's family engagement found "outcomes in parent ownership and empowerment--e.g., planning events for the program, facilitating events, etc.; positive increases in parent-parent communication, volunteering, parents asking for resources, positive communication between parents and children."<sup>vii</sup>



## A FRAMEWORK FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Effective family engagement involves enacting policies and then providing supports for programs to implement them. The first step in designing a framework or plan is to define family engagement so all stakeholders are in agreement. This definition should cover: *who* (families, schools, health care providers, community, etc.), *where* (settings), *purpose* (what family engagement should do), *how* (approaches to achieve purpose), and *key principles* (e.g., shared responsibility, inclusion, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Once this is defined, goal areas can then be developed. These should be outcomes for families rather than specific activities or strategies (see the [Head Start Parent Family and Community Engagement Framework](#) for an example of goals). By allowing individual programs the choice of best strategies to employ, programs can identify and implement the approaches that are specifically responsive to the families and communities they serve. The implementation is also more likely to be culturally appropriate using this approach.

<sup>3</sup>For examples of different definitions of family engagement, see page 4 of the policy brief [State Approaches to Family Engagement in Pre-K Programs](#)

A key part of the parent engagement framework is the relationship of mutual respect between staff and families. This relationship is ongoing, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and involves families as joint decision makers. A positive relationship serves as a base to gain buy-in and enthusiasm for more intensive approaches to support parenting practices and all-around family wellness. With relationships in place, pre-k providers will have a conduit to understand the content and delivery preferences of families and by co-constructing the approach, providers can share responsibility with parents. Enthusiasm typically builds through collaboration rather than directives from authorities. A welcoming environment is also important in gaining interest and acceptance from family members, some of whom may have had negative experiences with schooling themselves. [This report](#) for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) by the Urban Institute showed how welcoming environments, messaging, and partnerships were effective family engagement strategies in pre-k in addition to improving overall attendance.



# STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

For the purposes of this report, the remaining sections will explore types of strategies that support reaching family engagement goals, organized into two broad categories:

- Supporting child development as it relates to their pre-k experience
- Supporting long-term positive family outcomes

## Strategies for supporting child development

Programs have traditionally addressed parent engagement through supporting child development by providing parent-teacher conferences, hosting family events that share program information and engaging in ongoing communication with families. These are all strong strategies that should continue in addition to the ones listed below.

Families are critical partners in supporting their child's development in the classroom. They bring historical information and insights to add to the knowledge teachers possess to more accurately inform their understanding of a child's development. Families also pose an opportunity to bring learning from the classroom into the home. Relationships that are nurtured through early and ongoing two-way communication support this. Several ways in which these interactions can occur are explored below. In reviewing requirements for participating programs, many of these areas are already being addressed in PHLpreK programs.

### Home visits/Initial contact

First impressions are important. Initial contact with families should happen as soon as possible and center on goals for the child and family. While visiting a family in their home is ideal, staffing and costs may prove this prohibitive (e.g., paying teachers for time on home visits). These visits create a positive start to the families' relationship with the program. Educators can share the [Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood](#) and discuss assessments to prepare families for the year.

**Educators may need specific resources and training to support cultural and linguistic competence as well as to inform their work with children with special needs.**

To support educators in employing anti-bias strategies, one resource is [The CRAF-E4 Family Engagement Model: Building Practitioners' Competence to Work with Diverse Families \(First edition\)](#). While geared towards mental health practitioners working with young children (birth through age eight), it can also be effectively used by educators.

The [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center \(ECTA\)](#) offers [resources and tools](#) to support engagement of families with children with special needs.

### Useful resources:

- [Tips on parent-teacher home visits](#) from the Flamboyant Foundation, which worked with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) on family engagement.
- [Georgia's Pre-K program's Family Handbook](#) which walks families through what they can expect throughout the year, how they can participate in the program, and how they can help their child in reaching early learning and development benchmarks. The Keystone STARS revised standards identify a family handbook policy as an important piece of evidence of meeting multiple standards.

## Parent-Teacher conferences (formal and informal)/ Frequent communication

Under Keystone STARS, programs at STAR 3 or 4 have an opportunity to earn points by engaging in several standards that meet this practice. These include:

- Holding at least two family conferences a year (FC 3.4.2.)
- Having a system in place to communicate and document child observations to families (FC 3.4.5)
- Using a variety of methods to communicate with families about curriculum objective, early care and education goals, and effective strategies to support learning at home (FC 3.4.9).

To support programs in conducting effective conferences and to support ongoing communication, policymakers can provide guidance documents and support to practitioners. Useful examples include:

- [A Teacher Guide to Parent-Teacher Conferences](#) - outlines goals for conferences, how to prepare and structure a conference, and useful tips. (New York City Division of Early Childhood Education)
- [Video demonstrations](#) that include tips, reflections from educators, and an enactment of what an ideal conference would look like. (Flamboyant Foundation, in its work with DC Public Schools)
- [Academic Parent-Teacher Teams](#) in which the teacher, the entire class of parents, and a parent liaison meet three times a year for 75 minutes to examine data, set goals, and learn ways to extend learning in the home. Teachers meet individually with families one time a year for 30 minutes to review data and create an action plan.
- Newsletters, face-to-face conversations at drop off or pick up, notes homes, text, or email
- Photos to serve as a prompt to discuss the range of development supported in the classroom.

## Taking stock of preferred forms of communication

Some families may respond positively to text messages, while others prefer written notes or face-to-face communication. These preferences may stem from cultural or linguistic reasons or simply be personal preferences. Ascertaining a preferred mode of communication can be part of the home or initial visit. Note that some families change phone numbers and email addresses, so a best practice is to have periodic check-ins with families to confirm contact information.

## Intentional extension of learning from classroom to home

As families share existing knowledge of their child outside the classroom to inform the teacher about the child's development, so exist opportunities for programs to work with families on ways to extend learning in the classroom to the home. This can include sharing what students are working on, the areas of development they support, and additional activities that families can do at home with their child.

Nutrition and health are identified as an important area of focus for PHLpreK. Sharing knowledge and practices to support improved nutrition and health with families can bring those healthy practices into the home, positively benefitting the families as well as the individual child.

### Family involvement in the program (during or after hours)

There should be a range of activities for families to participate. This can include lower-value activities such as volunteering, attending events, or going on field trips, as well as higher-value activities like participating in a parents' advisory group that provides input on the program. Although not all families will want or have the time to participate in time-intensive activities, opportunities for their involvement should be made available.

New York City's Pre-K for All found celebrations, such as holidays, finishing curriculum units, cultural celebrations, and graduation, to be positive and useful ways to involve families in the program and make them feel welcome.



### Involving families in the transition to pre-k and from pre-k to kindergarten

Just as children may be excited, nervous/ anxious, and/or confused about transitions from classrooms to other classrooms or from program to program, families share these feelings. The 2017 edition of the Keystone STARS Performance Standards identifies the importance of transitions between classrooms and between pre-k to kindergarten (FC 3.4.3). Useful practices include:

- Planning templates prepare programs to take into account the different participants in a transition—children, families, school (sending and receiving), and the community—to create transition goals and accompanying actions, with attention to roles and responsibilities
- Transition activities such as preparing families for what kindergarten looks like in terms of expectations of children and families, schedules, and what children will be learning.
- Process supports to guide families in navigating the application process and identifying and procuring the necessary documents

### CONSIDERATIONS-- SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATORS

These strategies may require additional supports and training for educators such as allocating time for educators to prepare for meetings with families, and plan activities while providing supports to assist educators who may not feel comfortable or equipped to successfully implement these activities, particularly on how to use data with families or cultural/linguistic appropriateness.



## Strategies for supporting positive family outcomes

Programs have not traditionally considered supporting positive family outcomes as a part of their primary responsibility. Because these strategies have long-term implications to create conditions of family well-being that support a child going forward, they are essential to consider as a part of family engagement. In fact, except for health care centers, a child care center is the most likely place that the family of a young child might look for, seek out or welcome support.

Many of these strategies can be considered *two-generation approaches* or ones that “focus(es) on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of both vulnerable children and their parents together”<sup>viii</sup> across components such as postsecondary and employment pathways, economic assets, health and well-being, social capital, and early childhood education. PHLpreK aims to reach children living in high poverty and encourages enrollment of English Language

Learners, children with special needs and families experiencing homelessness. Families facing these conditions benefit from precisely these components.

These strategies can be time-consuming, require additional funding and fall into areas that pre-k providers are less familiar with; however strategic partnerships with community organizations (e.g., community health centers, libraries) can lower costs and take the burden off educators to “do everything.” Though not all families will need or want all the strategies outlined in this section, programs should consider how to offer them, connect families with them and ascertain the level of intensity each of their families would benefit from and their receptiveness to it. Programs that have strong relationships with families are best positioned to gain buy-in and interest from families due to the level of trust developed.



**Fathers** often wind up neglected in family engagement conversations, though they play integral roles in their children’s lives. Fatherhood involves additional points of consideration in terms of how to address employment, child supports, and other issues. Additionally, messaging and *who* delivers the message can play a role in receptivity. The [National Fatherhood Initiative](#) provides good examples of programs, resources, and training materials.

There are some initiatives that provide guidance and examples of father engagement. The Alameda County Public Health [Fatherhood Initiative](#) “promotes responsible fatherhood and healthy relationships through parenting education and skill building.”<sup>ix</sup> It also includes a case management component.



## Access to comprehensive services for the family

Today's families have complex needs that involve navigating complex systems. While programs may not have training and most likely don't have time or capacity to provide these services at the program site, they can serve as a connection point for families with these services. In order to truly support a child's short- and long-term development, immediate needs of families need to be met first. This includes health (e.g., finding medical homes), mental health, dental services, social services, and other areas. The 2017 edition of the Keystone STARS standards acknowledges the importance of comprehensive services with standards that address:

- Having a written and implemented plan for referral of families to social, mental health, educational, wellness, and medical services (FC 3.4.1)
- Demonstration that a variety of methods are used to communicate with families about curriculum objectives, early care and education goals, and effective strategies to support learning at home (FC 3.4.8)

Programs can identify access points to these supports in the community and then create relationships and partnerships with local organizations. These include, but are not limited to:

- Community centers, family resource centers, and behavioral health care services. For instance, programs can use [CAP4Kids](#), which provides information on a number of topics such as behavior, housing, and health, to identify potential organizations for connection.
- [Libraries](#) and [museums](#) serve as powerful community connectors.
- State or local community organizations who are trusted partners with immigrants or families whose home language is not English, such as the [Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition](#) and the [Latino Family Literacy Project](#).

## Parenting practices and understanding of child development

Knowledge of child development is instrumental in ensuring young children receive developmentally appropriate care in as high a dosage as possible. It can also reduce parental stress by helping parents understand their child's behavior from a developmental perspective rather than a "good/bad" point of view. The Institute of Medicine, in 2016, released a consensus report, [Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8](#), that identifies parenting knowledge, attitudes, and practices that show evidence of improving child outcomes. It also explores strategies that have shown effectiveness. One method to share and practice appropriate parenting skills is to host workshops centered on child development topics. NYC Pre-K for All programs reported using workshops and that they "were a valuable means of ensuring that family members had the necessary skills to support their children's academic and social-emotional development at home. Sites were also described as using workshops to ensure that families were aware of basic strategies for effective parenting."<sup>x</sup> Eliciting families' interests on topics serves as a hook to increase attendance. Programs can survey families to discover what issues they face, such as bedtime routines, transitions at home, biting, sharing, or other concerns.

There are many low-cost ways to share information on how to support child development, such as posting on a bulletin board that families can access, distributing newsletters, communicating on social media, or sharing face-to-face. Practitioners can link families to resources such as the ones below.

- [PA Promise for Children](#) provides resources for parents on child development, transition strategies and [Learning is Everywhere](#) activities for every day.
- [Maryland Family Engagement Toolkit](#) provides examples of “teachable moments” outside the classroom and how families can facilitate skill development of their child(ren) in these moments. These exemplars come from programs themselves and many are low-cost.
- [Too Small to Fail](#) offers variety of parenting resources
- [PBS Parents](#) provides examples of how to incorporate reading into daily routine activities
- [Vroom](#) provides prompts to spark ideas on maximizing teachable moments.

There are numerous intensive parenting interventions that show effectiveness or promise. The [Compendium of Parenting Interventions](#) provides key information on parenting interventions such as cost, outcomes it supports, and level of evidence. In reviewing the interventions, PHLprek programs should consider the demographics and the age range the intervention covers to ensure it is appropriate for the population it is intended to serve. Some of these interventions have considerable start-up or ongoing costs and training, so particular attention should be paid to the cost descriptions. Again, partnerships with community agencies such as health care centers or even [Philadelphia DHS Community Umbrella Agencies \(CUAs\)](#) may be a helpful way to provide these types of services.

## Access to further education, workforce development, and employment opportunities

Education and employment barriers can pose significant stressors on families that, in turn, negatively affect a child. Programs can play a role in lessening these barriers in a number of ways, for instance:

- Partner with local colleges to help identify family-friendly schedules and create a map towards degree completion.
- Link with local community organizations that focus on workforce development to provide access to these programs and to encourage participation. For example, the nonprofit [CAP Tulsa](#) provides training in healthcare careers that are in demand, while also providing high quality early childhood programs.

## Family peer-to-peer networks and leadership/advocacy development

Families bring many strengths to the table, and peer-to-peer networking opportunities tap into that social capital. A common approach to peer-to-peer networks is to set up [Parent Cafés](#). [Pennsylvania Strengthening Families](#) has conducted these parent cafés in different areas of the state. In Philadelphia, each CUA schedules several Parent Cafés throughout the year. Programs can earn points in Keystone STARS by establishing a family group to engage families and support their participation in their child(ren)’s education (FC 3.4.4.) or by providing education workshops on a variety of topics that are of interest to families (FC 3.4.6).

In San Antonio’s Pre-K 4 SA, each center “has a parent café staffed with two specialists who plan hundreds of activities for parents each year, such as workshops, volunteer opportunities, outings in the city, creative parent-child events, and activities that welcome other family members.”<sup>xi</sup>

Parent cafés incorporate leadership of families, but there are also programs that specifically focus on developing leadership skills. Family leadership was found to be “an effective way of engaging families” in an interim evaluation of Pennsylvania’s [Community Innovation Zone](#) family engagement study. Examples include the:

- [Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network \(PLAN\)](#) provides different levels of training to families on areas such as how to navigate the school system, becoming leaders in their child’s program/school, and advocacy.
- [National Parent Leadership Institute](#) provides a family-informed curriculum and training to develop leadership and advocacy skills.
- [Parent Power Academies](#) that build leadership skills and supports the development of social capital amongst families

Family leadership development prepares life-long skills for families to support their children. It also creates opportunities to identify the strengths and needs of families, connect with trusted community resources and organizations, and empower families to be program ambassadors who are able to connect with other families that programs may find difficult to access.

## Financial literacy support

Supporting financial literacy of families is a long-term strategy to lessen family stressors, build on family strengths, and build social capital. Programs can identify local community organizations that support financial literacy, such as the [One Less Foundation](#). An example of an intensive program is the [Family Independence Initiative \(FII\)](#), in which “FII families meet and come together in their neighborhoods to solve the problems that keep them from leading more economically secure lives. [FII] track[s] the progress of individual families and use[s] that data to identify and invest in the solutions that are working for them.”<sup>xii</sup>

## CONSIDERATIONS--SUPPORTS FOR PROGRAMS AND EDUCATORS

As demonstrated in examples, these components of family engagement are intensive and usually require partnerships within the community. However, the long-term positive impacts that flow from these activities make them well worth the effort. Programs can engage with families to determine what supports are most desired and then turn to the community to find potential partners that can offer these services.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

To build on current family engagement work, there are a number of methods that policymakers and programs can enact to support a more robust family engagement approach.

### Policymakers

1. **Defining a Framework.** As discussed earlier, while many PHLpreK programs are currently engaged in many of the strategies identified, activities aren't built to create a cohesive vision for family engagement outcomes. Crafting a framework that identifies outcomes of family engagement supports more effective family engagement. It encourages programs to design activities tied to these goals. Policymakers can create repositories of information and facilitate sharing of best practices. Useful frameworks and toolkits that address both child development and family outcomes include the following:
  - [Strengthening Families](#) is an approach that encompasses the strategies discussed in this paper and use of the framework is a standard in the 2017 edition of the Keystone STARS Program Performance Standards. LAUP has found positive results in their implementation and their [evaluation](#) findings will be of use to policymakers interested in lessons learned from implementation.
  - The toolkit [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#), commissioned by First 5 Alameda County, is an example of how policymakers can create a vision and communicate it with administrators, directors, and staff. The toolkit identifies how programs can support families' development by engaging with their children, shaping programs and services, and influencing policies and systems.
  - [Maryland's Family Engagement Toolkit](#) provides examples on "[effective practices](#)" programs have implemented that touch on at least one of the state's family engagement goals. These examples can easily be replicated in any early childhood program. For each practice, the toolkit identifies the age of the target audience, the duration, materials needed, level (easy, moderate, advanced), and the cost (\$, \$\$, \$\$\$).
2. **Family engagement coordinator.** Policymakers should also consider expanding the scope of a family engagement coordinator position(s). Many city pre-k programs house positions fully devoted to family engagement, though done so at various capacities. For example, San Antonio's pre-k program (Pre-K 4 SA) includes staffing for parent specialists who "plan activities, provide support and guidance in parenting, encourage parents' professional development, and generally foster the idea of active citizenship. A central part of their role is to identify areas in which Pre-K 4 SA can help families cross over from poverty and physical isolation in San Antonio, where urban sprawl and multiplying highways effectively section off the haves from the have-nots."<sup>xiii</sup> LAUP provides supports to educators through family engagement specialists who, in addition to working directly with families, provide teacher institutes and trainings. Many pre-k programs in the Boston Public School have a position solely dedicated to family engagement. This position is vital to ensure teachers are prepared and supported, partnerships can be explored, and families have access to a "go to" person.

### Early Childhood Programs

1. **Self-assessment of current family engagement.** Even with an overall vision for all PHLpreK programs, individual sites will need to develop plans specific to their families. To inform this plan, programs should conduct a self-assessment to answer the following questions:
  - What strengths do families bring?
  - Where do they need supports?
  - What specific outcomes do you want to reach?
  - What do you need to achieve it? (e.g., leadership, program design, training, partnerships etc.)

There are a number of self-assessments at the program level to design a plan based on how the program is currently functioning compared to its end goals. Examples of self-assessment tools that can be adapted are:

- [Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders](#) is a useful tool as it prompts discussion to inform planning across the following areas: building a culture of respect, inclusion, and equity; coaching parents; forming partnerships with parents; and collaborating with others to serve the whole family. It also provides strategies based on where a program is.
- [Strengthening Families Center-Based Program Self-Assessment](#) is a more in-depth tool that assesses where programs are in terms of implementing strategies that build the five protective factors (parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of the child).
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers a [Family Engagement Checklist](#) that covers communication, involvement in the program, and extension of learning to the home.

2. **Putting a family engagement framework into action.** In addition to self-assessments, programs can also evaluate the implementation and outcomes of family engagement practices. [Tracking Progress in Early Care and Education: Program, Staff, and Family Measurement Tools](#) profiles tools that can be used to measure to what extent a program is meeting certain family engagement goals (note, these are Head Start Family Engagement goals). Included in the description is information on administration time, scoring options, training level, and up-front costs. For PHLpreK, the Family Involvement Questionnaire–Early Childhood may be of interest to programs as it measures “family involvement behaviors that promote positive educational outcomes for young children” through a questionnaire that asks about home-based and school-based involvement as well as home-school conferencing.

## CONCLUSION

Family engagement activities may look different in individual programs but can all reach towards fulfilling mutual goals across programs. Having a common set of goals and expectations can ease the stress of trying to identify what strategies to select from the plethora of family engagement resources, materials, activities, and tools available, by supporting staff in focusing on the ones most relevant to the goals. The effect of PHLpreK’s funding goes well beyond the thousands of children it supports. Families, as well as children, gain benefits from a high quality pre-k program. Having a stronger comprehensive family engagement plan will ensure that the benefit is maximized for all.

## ENDNOTES

i [PHLpreK Website](#)

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vi Banuelos, N. (2016). *Evaluation of LAUP's new family engagement model: A Strengthening Families Framework FY 2015-16* (Research Brief). Retrieved from [http://laup.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/LAUP\\_FE\\_BRIEF\\_FE2016\\_rev20160922.pdf](http://laup.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/LAUP_FE_BRIEF_FE2016_rev20160922.pdf)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Melissa Dahlin** brings a strong background in early childhood education research, policy analysis, and technical assistance—as well as insights from her years as a preschool teacher—to her work in early childhood education. She is a doctoral student in education at the University of California, Irvine. Prior to starting her studies, she was an Associate Project Director at Education Development Center (EDC). Her primary project work was for the [Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes \(CEELO\)](#). In this role, she provided strategic technical assistance to build the capacity of state education agencies to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. She also developed research and policy resources and co-led the Preschool Development Grant Family Engagement Community of Practice. Previously, she worked on a number of projects at the national, state, and local level. Her experiences include technical training and assistance to support early childhood policy and practice, monitoring and evaluation, and classroom instruction. She holds an MA in International Educational Development from Teachers College, Columbia University. In all of her professional roles, and in her volunteer work as an infant/toddler playroom coordinator for the [Homeless Children's Playtime Project](#), Melissa is guided by a deep commitment to ensuring that all young children and families can access the resources and support they need to thrive.



The **Early Childhood Action Collective (ECAC)** is an initiative of [Public Health Management Corporation](#), sponsored by the [William Penn Foundation](#). ECAC is a multi-disciplinary consortium comprising researchers, policy experts, and practitioners who share a commitment to creating a better future for Philadelphia's children by informing policy and practice decisions to help move Philadelphia's early childhood education sector forward.



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