


Lawrence Public Schools - Family and Student Engagement Policies

 A set of three comprehensive district policies addressing student and family engagement, two-way communication, and shared decision-making in schools

Policy Background

[Lawrence Public Schools](#) in Lawrence, Massachusetts, has long been committed to authentically engaging its students, families, and community. Yet the district did not have formal policies in place until 2019, which limited the leadership's ability to uphold engagement as a priority or hold schools accountable for engaging and empowering their students and families. The absence of formal policies also contributed to an inconsistent application of engagement strategies across the district's schools.

During the 2017-2018 school year, the Lawrence Public Schools Family Engagement Partnership Council—which is composed of four students, three parents, three educators, three school leaders, and the Family Engagement staff from the district's central office—decided to address this challenge. The Family Engagement Partnership Council began considering how to make family engagement a stronger priority and ultimately identified the need for clear policies, goals, and accountability measures addressing student and family engagement.

The following school year, the Family Engagement Partnership Council spent the first half of the year learning: they discussed the difference between policy and procedure, reviewed the research linking high-quality family and student engagement with academic outcomes, studied school autonomy, and researched effective methods for sharing promising practices.

The second half of the year was focused on action. First, the Family Engagement Partnership Council identified what they called “themes for inclusion”—the policy areas that needed to be addressed—which included communication, shared decision-making, parents as partners, student voice, and fostering the roles families can play to have the greatest impact on their children's education.

The group then invited feedback on those themes during a district-wide engagement summit with more than 100 community participants. They developed specific mandates and guidance for each

theme, further clarified which ideas should be procedures and which should be policies, and gathered even more feedback on their ongoing work from those who had participated in the summit. Importantly, the team identified barriers to effective engagement and made sure that the policies supported the district, students, and families to overcome those barriers.

At the end of the year's work, the Family Engagement Partnership Council developed three family and student engagement policies that were presented to the Lawrence Public Schools Receiver Board in June 2019: (1) [Family and Student Engagement](#), (2) [School Leadership Teams](#), and (3) [Student Involvement in Decision-Making](#). The policies were approved in August 2019 and are publicly available in English and Spanish on the district's [policy website](#).

Even though the policies were approved quite recently, **Assistant Superintendent Denise Snyder** says the district is already seeing early indicators of positive change in the district:

"There is already impact in the ways schools are managing their engagement commitments. For example, the policies include dates by which student leaders need to be identified for various opportunities, and a date by which School Leadership Teams need to be formed. The dates have pushed schools into action sooner than they may have otherwise."

In addition, one of the policies calls for the creation of a Superintendent's Student Cabinet, which is a group of ten high school students representing each grade level and every secondary school and program in the district. Participating youth discuss issues of student concern with the superintendent, engage in collaborative problem-solving, and share the cabinet's work with their peers. Inspired by the cabinet, one of the middle school principals in the district decided to create her own Principal's Student Cabinet.

Schools in the district are also creating School Leadership Teams, which must include at least one community representative, one student representative, and an equal number of parents and school staff. According to Snyder, schools have started to proactively reach out to the family engagement staff at the central office to ask for assistance, coaching, and advice, rather than waiting until they experience a challenge to ask for help.

Policy Language

[FULL TEXT]

LAWRENCE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Family and Student Engagement Policy

Policy Statement

The Lawrence Public Schools believes that family and student engagement is an integral part of the student success equation. Families, students, and schools need to be in partnership to maximize opportunities for students to achieve their full potential. To that end, this policy fosters proactive communication, student voice, education and support for the roles families can play that best support their students' learning, as well as collaboration and shared decision making among all stakeholders. It also provides guidance on capacity-building in schools and with families in order to realize high-quality engagement.

Communication

The district and our schools commit to communication methods that are welcoming and accessible to our student and family populations. This includes translation into high-incidence languages, as well as ensuring that messages are jargon-free. While some messages by necessity call for mass-communication methods, such as those regarding the ongoing promotion of events, weather cancellations, or whole-school community incident reports, to the extent possible, communications should be personalized and provide for two-way dialogue or response. To that end, the district and its schools shall:

- Prioritize methods of communication with families that allow for direct, personal and two-way communication, such as phone calls, in-person meetings, and the use of texting technology.
- Assure that the school staff communicates clear expectations for performance to both students and parents.
- Ensure that every document shared with families is translated and available in high-incidence languages, which may be defined as languages spoken by at least five percent of the enrolled population, and includes contact information for possible questions or follow up.
- Ensure that an interpreter (staff, contracted or community partner-provided) is available to support interpretation requests by families whose first language is among those identified in the district as high incidence, and for essential conversations, such as IEP meetings, in the language requested regardless of incidence level.
- For families whose first language is a low-incidence language, include in important messages home a notation translated in the appropriate language that encourages the family to have the entire notice translated.
- Use multiple methods to reach families about activities or resource offerings, such as, but not

limited to, outreach in the community (fliers in salons, stores, etc.), social media and website promotion, school newsletters, in backpacks through the schools, and automated calls, as necessary.

- Extend frequent and clear invitations for parents and other caregivers to be involved in student- or school-related activities, volunteer opportunities and related events, providing realistic lead times and reminders for families, as well as expressing the value of said opportunities as it correlates to student success. To the extent possible, at least one touchpoint per invitation should provide for two-way communication, such as a phone call, texting application, or similar.

The district shall also:

- Maintain an accessible and up to date website, with translation options available for all main content areas, as well as links to translations for all embedded documents.

- Provide annual opportunities to build capacity in school leaders and staff to engage in intercultural communications.

Family Partnerships

While the responsibility to partner in service of a student's success should be shared equally by schools, families and students, the onus belongs with the district and schools to invite families (the parents, guardians or others who provide daily care and support) and students into partnership. To that end, proactive opportunities to build relationships should be identified and incorporated in school educational goals and operational calendars.

To foster family partnerships, schools must:

- Initiate proactive two-way communication with families and students. This may include, but is not limited to, personal calls, home visits, email, or physical mail that includes a reply mechanism, such as who to call or email for questions.

- Strive for regular touch points with families, such as, but not limited to, during student entry points (including for those who begin after the start of the year), semester, and/or mid-term check-ins.

- Frequent reports to parents on their children's progress.

- Encourage and create opportunities for families and educators to share information, discuss student needs and strengths, develop relationships and, as needed, build collaborative plans for safety and academic success.

- Schedule parent/teacher or student-led conferences in accordance with the school's operational plans.

- Plan for meaningful meetings and conferences with families that include clearly stated objectives and, as needed, proper interpretation as well as translated materials, as outlined in the Communications section of this policy.

- Welcome the advocacy of parents and students seeking access to differentiated learning, alternative coursework or pathways (i.e. early college, credit recovery, AP coursework), as

opportunities exist.

- Collaboratively plan with their school community to host welcome to school opportunities for new students in order to welcome, orient, and support their successful transitions. Said activities should support community building and the sharing of critical school-level information and related resources.

The district shall identify and make available opportunities for development that build capacity of school leaders, staff, and families in ways that enable and foster said partnerships.

Student Voice

Just as the partnership of parents/caregivers is critical to student success, so are the contributions of students' ideas, inputs, and feedback in areas both individual and collective. Here, too, the district and schools must lead the way, creating the capacity and space for student voice to thrive and to help shape the culture, climate and academic opportunities that define student experiences in Lawrence Public Schools. Specific guidance for these efforts may be found in the revised LPS policy # JIB Student Involvement in Decision Making.

Shared Decision Making

Successful school improvement is best accomplished through a shared decision-making process that involves all stakeholders. Equitable engagement requires school leaders to share power with students, families, and staff. In such a model, school decisions are centered on students and inclusive of considerations for context, community, and capacity.

At the district level, decisions are made by the superintendent of schools, with input from a leadership team, which represents matters related to academics, operations, engagement, and student supports, with matters of policy and budget approved by the district's governing body. To ensure equitable opportunities for additional stakeholder contributions, the district must:

- Foster and maintain regular opportunities for parent, student, educator and school leader input and feedback. These should include regular meetings with principals, the establishment and maintenance of a student advisory (see JIB) and a districtwide stakeholder council, and the hosting of community dialogues as appropriate.

- Maintain a district entity to provide capacity building for schools and families, support schools in their related efforts, and bolster stakeholder engagement.

- Implement an annual school climate survey for parents and students, with resulting school-level data shared with individual schools for the purposes of whole school improvement planning.

Schools, as with the district, must foster shared decision making by establishing inclusive opportunities to bring parents, students, and educators into discussions that support collaborative governance. To this end, each school must:

- Maintain a school council (commonly referenced as a School Leadership Team) as required by MA Ch 71:59C

- Develop a parent leadership and networking council that, at the discretion of the school, may be a

Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) or a family council that meets independently but includes staff support to assist with maintenance of the organization and to act as the liaison between the school and the families (as outlined in Title 1 regulations). *This body should be the entity for electing parents to the school council.

— Lead a collaborative effort to annually draft, review and potentially revise a home-school compact that outlines the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders to support student success in their community (as required in federal ESSA requirements). The home-school compact shall be included on individual school pages of the District's website. *The school may determine to use their council (School Leadership Team), a PTO or similar, or a newly organized group of stakeholders to carry out the home-school compact development.

— Create opportunities at the classroom level to provide forums that foster safe spaces for shared voice, and the open and safe expression of ideas or concerns.

— Maintain student government entities at the middle and high school level, with encouragement for similar leadership and contributory opportunities at lower grade levels.

Nothing in these guidelines should be construed as a mandate to establish a new entity if an existing structure exists that meets the guidelines provided herein.

Fostering Roles Families Can Play to Support Student Success

Research points to five caretaker roles that are proven strategies for supporting students' academic success. Schools must maximize opportunities to inform, encourage and foster these roles:

- ☐ Monitoring their child's performance
- ☐ Guiding their child's education
- ☐ Communicating high expectations
- ☐ Supporting learning at home
- ☐ Advocating for their child

To this end, schools should be intentional in the building of their school year calendar to identify opportunities for one-to-one conversations, messaging and events that feature one or more of these roles so that schools help families build their own capacity in each of these areas.

Further, parent/guardian access to a student's assignments, grades and attendance must be made consistently available, utilizing the parent portal or similar technology so that parents may monitor frequently their child's performance.

Utilizing proactive communication strategies (see above), schools can support learning at home, with suggestions about curriculum questions to ask their children or tips on how to extend learning at home.

Schools should include evidence in their Title 1 submissions of the promotion and incorporation of these roles in their school communities.

Building Capacity

The district must provide school leaders and staff annual guidance, regular professional development opportunities, and/or ongoing coaching to help schools build capacity for these authentic efforts.

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