


Portland Public Schools - School and Family Partnership Policy

 A district family-engagement policy based on recommendations developed by youth, parents, and educators using an inclusive dialogue process coordinated by community advocates and parent organizers

Policy Background

Portland Public Schools in Portland, Maine, is [the state's largest and most racially and ethnically diverse public school district](#). Of the district's nearly 7,000 students, 56% are white, 25% are of African descent, 7% are Hispanic, 6% are two or more races, and 5% are Asian. Nearly a quarter of the district's students are identified as English-language learners, and at least 67 different languages are spoken by 33% of the student population.

The [Youth and Community Engagement team](#) at the University of Southern Maine's [Cutler Institute](#) coordinates [Portland Empowered](#), a community-engagement initiative working to ensure that student, parent, and family voices—especially those that have been historically underrepresented—are reflected in the policies and practices of the city's diverse school district.

In 2013–2014, Portland Empowered developed the [Shared Space Café](#), an inclusive community-dialogue and decision-making process that addresses the unequal power dynamics that can result from cultural barriers such as differences in language ability, education, income, or social status. Through a series of Shared Space Cafés, parents, community members, and educators came together to discuss how they could better communicate with and engage one another.

The Shared Space Cafes were developed in response to a specific need, says Pious Ali of Portland Empowered:

“When Portland Empowered started some years ago, we initially said, ‘We’re going to get our parents to engage with the schools.’ Then we realized that there was no means for authentic engagement between the parents we were working with and the administrators and staff of Portland Public Schools, and no step-by-step process for the district to engage with parents—so we took a step back, used a grassroots model of organizing, and went out to engage parents in community and hear about their experiences.”



In 2019, Portland Empowered published [The Portland Empowered Guide to Planning and Hosting a Shared Space Café](#), which describes the steps and strategies the organization uses to create inclusive and welcoming spaces for dialogue, listening, and decision-making between families and educators. According to the guide, “Shared Space Cafés bring together parents, teachers, and administrators in a safe and friendly atmosphere where barriers are broken down and student success can become the focus of open discussion. Shared Space Cafés disrupt the usual power dynamic from one in which schools present one-way information to parents to one in which parents and schools are in dialogue about education and the changes required.” Source: Portland Empowered.

The Portland Empowered dialogues resulted in the initiative’s [Parent and Family Engagement Manifesto](#), which outlines a set of six recommendations for improving youth, family, and community engagement in Portland Public Schools. More than a hundred parents and family members from

historically underrepresented groups in the community contributed to the development of the manifesto.

As a result of Portland Empowered Portland's advocacy, which included numerous one-on-one meetings with school board members and other district and city leaders, the [Portland Board of Public Education](#) formally endorsed the Parent and Family Engagement Manifesto in 2014.

In 2016, largely due to Portland Empowered's ongoing community organizing and advocacy work, the Portland Board of Public Education approved a resolution to create a new committee tasked with reviewing and revising the school district's Parent Involvement Policy to make it more inclusive and equitable. The board also directed committee members to use the Parent and Family Engagement Manifesto as a reference and guide for drafting the new policy.

The resulting [School and Family Partnership Policy](#) was passed by the Portland Board of Public Education in March 2017.

Policy Language

[FULL TEXT]

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SCHOOL AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP POLICY

The Portland Board of Public Education honors the diversity of families and recognizes the important role parents, guardians and families play in the education of their children.

The Board encourages partnerships between the district administration, schools and families in order to share the responsibility of educating our students. The Board believes that our students will thrive if we welcome, inform, engage and empower families to support their children in school and build strong school communities.

Finally, the Board directs school and district representatives to use the following policy values as guides in their work and to engage families in ways that:

1. Value and encourage face-to-face relationships.
2. Create safe spaces where everyone is welcome and valued as an expert in their role.

3. Encourage families, schools, and communities to work together to improve student success.
4. Enable a range of voices to be heard by decision-makers.
5. Are accessible to parent and community leaders from diverse backgrounds.
6. Devote sufficient resources to parent engagement and community outreach.

In order to promote school and family partnerships, the Board will:

- Use the policy values above to inform other Board policies and the work of the Board.
- Ensure that financial and personnel resources are devoted to these efforts through the budgeting process.
- Encourage broad family involvement that is representative of our community and culturally responsive.
- Inform the community about family partnership initiatives and progress in the Board Chair's annual State of the Schools address.

In order to promote school and family partnerships, the District will:

- Provide training to school and parent groups on best practices in school and family partnerships.
- Communicate to families the learning expectations at all grade levels.
- Support, through outreach and interpretation services, face-to-face communication between families and teachers at least twice a year for all families, on an as-needed basis for students experiencing challenges, and as requested by parents.
- Establish a Family Partnership Advisory Committee that is representative of the community to provide input on key district initiatives and oversee implementation of the School and Family Partnership Policy.
- Devote financial and personnel resources to the implementation of this policy.
- Adopt clear goals of increased family engagement with measurable indicators of progress.

In order to promote school and family partnerships, Schools will:

- Support a culture of partnership by creating a welcoming environment for all families.
- Establish a regular forum for parents to discuss school success plans and their experiences with the school.
- Create opportunities for two-way communication between schools and all families.
- Include in the school's annual success plan a measurable school and family partnership goal aligned with at least one of the enumerated policy values.

- Inform families of the learning expectations for all grade levels.
- Let families know how they can become involved with the school.
- Use family involvement strategies that are culturally responsive and representative of the Portland community.

In order to promote school and family partnerships, Schools receiving Title I funds will:

- Develop and distribute to families of participating children a school-level family partnership handbook that is aligned with this policy and with the requirements of federal law.

To support their children’s learning, Families can:

- Talk about the importance of school.
- Volunteer at their child’s school, join a parent organization, or serve on a committee, when possible.
- Attend school programs and conferences designed to inform families about what and how students are learning.
- Inform school staff about children’s strengths and challenges, and keep staff informed of changes that might affect learning or behavior.
- Notify the schools and the district of changes in contact information.
- Ask and advocate for what is needed to support student learning.

Support and Accountability

A district-wide Family Partnership Advisory Committee, appointed by the Superintendent or a designee, with representatives that could include parents/guardians, a Board member, multilingual/multicultural representatives and families, school and district staff, community partners, students, and alumni will be established to support, monitor, and report on the implementation of the School and Family Partnership Policy.

The district will conduct, with advice from this committee, an annual review and evaluation of the implementation of the policy and any accompanying regulations (e.g. using the district parent survey).

Adoption of Regulations

The Superintendent has overall responsibility for implementing this policy and accompanying regulations, with support from the Family Partnership Advisory Committee and designee, if assigned.

Development of the initial policy regulations, and any substantial revisions of regulations, requires broad and inclusive family, school, and community input. The Superintendent or a designee may develop administrative regulations as necessary for effective and timely implementation of this policy and its accompanying regulations.

Regulations must be consistent in every respect with the Board’s policies and procedures.

This policy does not affect or alter the authority of the Board, the Superintendent and administration to act in accordance with law and other applicable policies.

Cross Reference: Parent & Family Engagement Manifesto

Adopted: March 7, 2017

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