

White paper: FAST Institute as a way to transform family engagement

Schools have experienced a challenging post-pandemic recovery, with soaring rates of school absencesⁱ and spotty academic recovery.ⁱⁱ Establishing strong family engagement is a critical tool for families and educators to strengthen necessary partnerships in support of children's success.

All educators—teachers, administrators, support staff, and others—need support in working collaboratively and productively with families. The challenge remains that many school personnel do not receive proper training, yet are often expected to do this work, which can create more opportunities for even deeper divides between families and school staff.

While principals and districts frequently cite family engagement as a major priority, there are few organizations offering family engagement-focused professional development.

Families & Schools Together partners with community-based organizations and schools to implement evidence-based, family engagement programming. This program, the FAST Institute of Family Engagement, provides the training school and district staff need to feel confident and comfortable in collaborating with families in support of children.

Background

Families & Schools Together (FAST) is a non-profit organization that envisions a world where in every community, every child thrives. With a mission to nurture the inherent potential of every child by uniting families, schools, and communities, FAST partners with community-based organizations and schools around the country and the world to implement evidence-based, family engagement programming.

The FAST Institute is based on findings of our long-running FAST Program, which supports student learning, and improves children's behavior and well-being, by building relationships among families, schools, and communities. Multiple Randomized Controlled Trials have demonstrated FAST's effectiveness, and studies have shown FAST to engage socially marginalized families with schools and improve children's social and cognitive development.^{iii iv v vi} The FAST program has been successfully replicated and implemented across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups in urban and rural settings worldwide and has earned inclusion on several evidence-based lists.

As family engagement is an increasing focus for schools, the FAST Institute helps schools strengthen their connections to families. The Institute helps school and district staff make a mindset shift away from outdated forms of parent involvement toward family engagement and empowerment; through their involvement in the Institute, participants learn to establish the trust needed to form strong, equity-focused relationships with families to support children's improved academic achievement and social well-being. By blending best practices in teacher training,

family engagement, and social-emotional learning into interactive workshops and ongoing coaching, the Institute helps schools create a more welcoming environment for families of all racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Criteria for Acceptable Solutions

Research demonstrates the incredible impacts of family engagement: stronger academic success^{vii viii ix x} and better school attendance^{xi} for children, increased skills among parents to advocate for their children,^{xii} and more collaboration between families and schools.^{xiii} Families feel more positively towards their children’s teachers and the school^{xiv xv}. Parents also have been shown to feel more confident about their abilities to help their children, gain a deeper understanding of the formal and informal rules of the school, and develop deeper knowledge about the importance of their role in their child’s education.^{xvi xvii}

Families & Schools Together believes that families are central and critical to the educational performance of children, and we view families as active and equal participants in the work we do. Rather than just relegating families to fill prescribed roles or to participate in school-driven activities (back-to-school nights, bake sales), we see parents as the primary teachers of their children and recognize and honor the knowledge they bring to the table.

Instead of engaging in outdated practices that do not reflect the needs of all families, researchers and practitioners recommend the following: engaging in authentic, culturally responsive family engagement;^{xviii} involving families and communities^{xix} in making decisions about programs; addressing the innate power dynamics between school staff and families;^{xx} engaging in targeted outreach to marginalized families who generally have low participation rates;^{xxi xxii} providing social opportunities for families to build strong networks with other families and communities;^{xxiii xxiv} and partnering with community organizations and attending local community functions.^{xxv xxvi} —

Engaging in more inclusive practices frequently requires a shift in a school’s attitude toward parents.^{xxviii} This shift requires building trusting relationships with all parents, including those from backgrounds different from the staff, which is not always an easy task. As Hill (2010) notes, “In some cases, teachers will have to build bridges over valleys they did not create and mend wounds they did not cause in order to reach families” (p. 121).^{xxix} This will also require a shift from school administrators, some of whom view parents in a deficit-based way, to start seeing parents and community members as potential sources of leadership.^{xxx} This could be a significant shift for some administrators, as educational expertise is traditionally seen as residing in professionals, not parents or community members.^{xxxi xxxii}

Research suggests that training teachers to become “more supportive, effective and engaged in their relationships with parents” may affect teachers’ awareness of their own biases, and, thus, help support struggling students.^{xxxiii} One of the goals of the FAST Institute is to elicit a mindset shift in teachers which will affect their conceptions of -- and, ultimately, their relationships with -- families.^{xxxiv}

Professional development can be an effective way for teachers to change and improve their practice.^{xxxv} In fact, over 98% of teachers reported participating in some form of professional development in 2017-18.^{xxxvi} Despite the ubiquitous nature of teacher professional development, only 40% of teachers in a TNTP survey thought the professional development they received was a good use of their time.^{xxxvii} A one-time workshop, which is what most teachers experience, frequently does not change teacher practice and does not have a positive effect on student achievement.^{xxxviii} Studies show that professional development should be ongoing and provide opportunities for collaboration, coaching, and reflection to effectively elicit change. Ideally, professional development should occur over time and be ongoing so that new learnings have time to take root. Thus, the FAST Institute should occur over the course of one or two school years, building content, strategy, and skills over time, not in one “sit and get” professional development session. This allows school staff to not only learn new strategies but have the time to implement them across the school building and/or district.

Teachers benefit from a supportive professional learning community that reinforces what they have learned in professional development and that provides a setting that fosters support and trust. According to researcher Michael Fullan (2001), “the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost” (p. 5).^{xxxix} Providing professional development to the whole school, as opposed to a subset of teachers, is a way to provide a professional learning community in the school, ensuring common experience and vocabulary to discuss and follow through on new knowledge and skills learned.



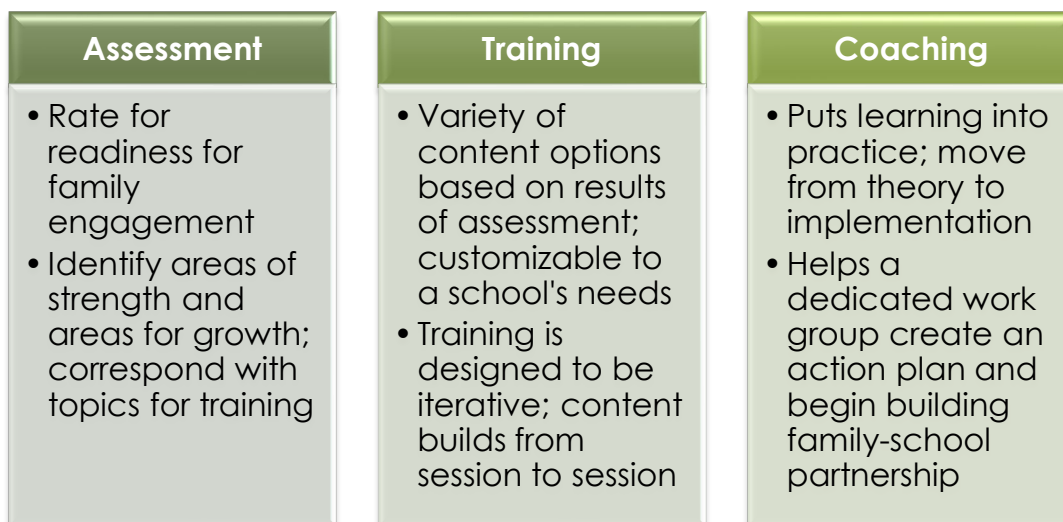
Recommendation: The FAST Institute

The [FAST Institute of Family Engagement](#) provides the training educators need to be confident and capable in partnering with families. Over the course of a year, educators receive multiple professional development sessions, building on content over time, which are conducted in a

community of practice style to facilitate sharing of knowledge and expertise among participating educators.

Participants take a readiness assessment to highlight areas of strength and areas for growth; these results determine which professional development sessions are offered and may include: creating a family-friendly environment; parent advocacy and empowerment; engaging the community; bridging race, class, and culture; strengthening classroom conditions for family engagement; among others. Ongoing supplemental coaching is offered to help schools put the information and tools learned into action, to make concrete change towards the overall program goals which include:

1. Support educators to build a welcoming school climate and culture that values and respects families as partners
2. Establish practices at the classroom and school-wide level which link family engagement to learning and academic success
3. Guide teams to engage families in culturally diverse settings, and bridge racial, class, cultural differences through an asset-based approach
4. Assist educators in collaborating with family leaders to create and implement family-centered activities and services; engage with community organizations to build partnerships



The FAST Institute encourages a change in teacher mindsets and helps schools to become more welcoming places for parents. Through professional development and coaching sessions, Families & Schools Together involves school staff in a community of practice and ongoing professional development. We train school staff to move past one-way communication, such as parent-teacher conferences, to a system that includes feedback. Part of the training encourages school leaders to be committed to authentically engaging families. Additionally, part of this

training involves the very difficult process of examining one's own implicit bias and shifting one's mindset.

Through two years of implementing the FAST Institute in Milwaukee Public Schools, several facets of this training emerged as key components, which should be applied to any future iterations of the FAST Institute:

Roles and concepts in family engagement need to be defined and agreed upon so that everyone is working from the same definition. Not everyone operates from the same definition of family engagement. We help clarify what family engagement is, how to best utilize family engagement professionals, and share with schools and staff foundational ideas and strategies in family engagement to get everyone on the same page.

Supportive administrators and districts are key to family engagement success. Buy-in from school leaders is key, including school building administrators and district-level staff. Administrators and district-level staff frequently do not have training in family engagement, and they, too, require professional development in this field. Some districts still view family engagement as an "add-on" and not a central focus; because there is minimal support for this type of department, they are often under-resourced (staff, funding). We recommend working collaboratively with the district, including developing and providing materials they can use in their work but may not have the time/bandwidth to create. Most likely, these departments have a list of goals and priorities but may not have the staff-power to accomplish them. Working collaboratively can help the district meet those objectives while also providing continuous assistance to schools.

Building relationships is an explicit part of our program goals. Participants need time to build relationships, whether through coaching, as a cohort-based learning community, or with their own family engagement-focus staff members. This takes more time than anyone expects, and it must be built into the structure of the program in order for it to happen effectively; ultimately, we believe that providing the time and structure for this pays off in stronger relationships.

Schools are on a continuum in relation to their family engagement efforts/needs and need to be met where they are. Instead of having the same goals for each of our cohort schools, we needed to meet the schools where they were. FAST Institute participants engage in monthly individualized coaching sessions with a FAST coach and their school's Family Engagement Team (composed of parent engagement personnel, at least one administrator, and at least one teacher at their school). Some schools form family engagement teams faster than others; some participants came to this work with deep experience and a full toolbox of skills, while others

were newer to the role and needed more support. We meet each school and participants where they are, tailoring our support to their needs.

Underpinning everything is a commitment to equity. The FAST Institute has a commitment to access and equity and promoting authentic, empowered, culturally responsive family engagement (as opposed to traditional methods of parent engagement, such as bake sales).^{xi xli xlii} All families are important and we should prioritize outreach to marginalized families/those who generally have low participation rates.^{xliii xliiv} It is important to keep in mind the needs and perspectives of marginalized families (e.g., time conflicts, need for child care, transportation challenges, etc.) and consider hosting some events off-site in the community, at varying times, and with childcare provided.^{xlv xlvi xlvii xlviii}

Conclusion

As a society, we have a moral obligation to nurture, educate, and support each of our students, recognizing that how that looks may vary from student to student. Families & Schools Together recognizes that the family is the first social structure that children are a part of, setting the tone for their relationships to the school, the community, and other entities. Families play a critical role in their children's lives, and family-school-community partnerships are an integral part of an equitable education system. Through the FAST Institute, we work to help schools make the crucial mindset shift to recognize and value what families bring to the table and collaborate with families so that all children can thrive.

The FAST Institute provides support to educators, school staff, and administration through professional development aimed at supporting teachers/school personnel in their collaboration with families. Family engagement programming could be helpful for all schools, and for schools serving a more vulnerable student population, this work is critical.

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ⁱⁱ Miller, C. C. & Mervosh, S. (2024, Jan. 31). *Students are making a ‘surprising’ rebound from pandemic closures. But some may never catch up*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/01/31/us/pandemic-learning-loss-recovery.html>

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