

Strategies for Engaging Families in the Secondary Transition Process

Approaches that center community, context, and family strengths

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- Identify traditional approaches to family engagement in secondary transition
- Explore innovative and community-driven strategies for strengthening partnerships
- Reflect on current practices, share ideas, and identify at least two strategies to apply in your school or district
- Learn methods for evaluating family engagement and its impact on post-school outcomes
- Develop an action step for implementing at least one new family engagement approach or tool

What Is Traditional Family Engagement?

Common Examples:

- Attending IEP meetings
- Helping with homework
- Signing forms or attending open house events
- Responding to school communication

Often focused on compliance or participation in school-led events

What's Missing in Traditional Approaches?

Often one-size-fits-all

- May not align with family work schedules, languages, or values
- Focuses on deficits rather than strengths
- Can exclude extended family, community, or informal supports

A Broader View of Engagement

Engagement = Partnership

- Collaborative
- Ongoing and relational
- Grounded in family and community context
- Values different types of capital:
 - Social,
 - Cultural,
 - Linguistic,
 - Aspirational,
 - Navigational,
 - Familial

Expanding Non-Traditional Family Engagement: A Person-Centered Approach

Why Person-Centered Approaches Matter

- Traditional engagement often revolves around compliance and school agendas.
- A person-centered approach shifts the focus toward relationships, listening, and co-planning.
- It emphasizes:
 - What is important to the student and family
 - What is important for the student's safety, health, and well-being
 - The family's definition of a meaningful life
- This approach respects that families are the experts on their child and prioritizes their cultural, social, and lived experiences.

Ways to Use Person-Centered Practices to Engage Families

- Listen First: Use Structured Conversations
- Host listening sessions with families (individually or in small groups)
 - Use prompts like:
 - What does a good life look like for your child in the future?
 - What are your hopes and fears as they grow into adulthood?
 - Who are the most important people in your child's life?
 - How do you define independence or success?
 - Tools: PATH and MAPS facilitation, Charting the LifeCourse (CtLC) conversations, Discovery interviews

Sample Listening Session Prompts Supporting Structured Family Conversations

These guiding questions are designed to help families share their priorities, hopes, and visions for their child's future. They build on person-centered practices and emphasize listening first.

Opening the Conversation

What does a good life look like for your child in the future?

Notes:

What are your hopes and dreams as they grow into adulthood?

Notes:

What are your biggest fears or concerns about their future?

Notes:

Relationships and Supports

Who are the most important people in your child's life?

Notes:

Incorporate Visual and Accessible Tools

Some families may feel more comfortable contributing through visual mapping, storytelling, or structured tools rather than formal meetings. Examples:

- “One-Page Profiles”: Snapshot of strengths, needs, preferences
- CtLC Trajectory Tool: Visual representation of life goals and steps
- Photo Voice: Use photos to represent hopes, dreams, or routines
- Life Mapping: Families and students draw or create vision boards for life after high school

Honor Multiple Forms of Capital

Forms of Family Capital Quick Reference for Educators and Practitioners

Family engagement goes beyond school-based participation. Families bring diverse forms of *capital*—knowledge, resources, and strengths—that enrich planning and support for their children.

Social Capital

Definition: Networks of relationships and connections that provide support and opportunities.

Examples:

- A parent's connections with local employers who can offer job shadowing.
- Church or community groups that provide mentorship or after-school opportunities.
- Neighbors or friends who help with transportation or care.

Cultural Capital

Definition: Values, traditions, and practices that shape how families view education and success.

Examples:

- Family traditions of storytelling to pass down resilience and history.
- Celebrating cultural holidays that affirm identity.
- Emphasizing community responsibility over individual achievement.

Linguistic Capital

Definition: Language skills and communication practices that reflect family identity and strengths.

Examples:

- Bilingual or multilingual families who foster cross-cultural communication.
- Use of proverbs, songs, or storytelling as teaching tools.
- Children interpreting or translating for family members, showing leadership.

- Recognize that families contribute more than school-based involvement:
- Social Capital – Networks, community connections, mentors
 - Cultural Capital – Values, identity, traditions that shape priorities
 - Linguistic Capital – Language and communication styles
 - Aspirational Capital – Dreams and goals for the future
- Non-traditional engagement values family stories, not just school data.

Embed Engagement in Everyday Life

- Meet families where they are — not just at school.
 - Co-host events with churches, barbershops, rec centers, or local businesses
 - Create flexible meeting formats: text messaging, WhatsApp groups, video drop-ins
 - Partner with community navigators, family liaisons, or peer advocates
 - Offer role-specific family nights (e.g., siblings, grandparents, kinship caregivers)

Capture What's Important To & For the Student

Person-Centered Thinking Tools (PCP) can be used during IEP planning, informal interviews, or transition planning sessions

Tool	Purpose
<i>Important To / Important For Chart</i>	Helps teams distinguish between what matters most to the student vs. what supports their health and safety
<i>Relationship Map</i>	Identifies key people in the student's life and support network
<i>Rituals & Routines Chart</i>	Documents what a good day looks like, including preferences and sensory/environmental considerations
<i>Learning Logs</i>	Captures what works/doesn't work after experiences like job shadowing or new routines

Non-Traditional Approaches

Examples from Practice:

- Conducting home visits or virtual check-ins
- Family storytelling sessions to share student strengths
- Texting or social media for updates and dialogue
- Hosting transition nights in local community centers or churches
- Using parent advisory groups or family liaisons
- Collaborating with local businesses or cultural organizations

Reflection & Discussion Prompt

Breakout Discussion:

- How do you currently engage families in transition planning?
- How might you shift or adapt your approach to be more person-centered?
- What non-traditional methods have worked in your community?

Be prepared to report out!

Evaluating Engagement Efforts

Ask Yourself:

- Are more families attending, but also contributing to meetings?
- Are families sharing their priorities, goals, and cultural values?
- Do students have stronger self-determination and clearer goals?

Evaluating Engagement Efforts - Tools

- Family surveys
- Focus groups
- Participation data
- Student transition progress indicators

Family Engagement Reflection Tool: Guided Reflection for Continuous Improvement

This tool is designed to help schools and partners reflect deeply on the quality of family engagement practices. Rather than focusing on compliance or attendance counts, the tool emphasizes meaningful contributions, cultural responsiveness, and student-centered outcomes. It encourages practitioners to pause, reflect, and identify both strengths and opportunities for growth.

How to Use This Tool

Choose a recent IEP meeting, family listening session, or engagement event as your focus. For each section below, read the guiding questions, reflect individually or with your team, and record your observations. As you reflect, identify:

- **Strengths:** Examples of meaningful, inclusive, or effective engagement.
- **Growth Areas:** Places where engagement could be strengthened or better aligned with family priorities.
- **Next Steps:** One or two concrete actions to try before the next engagement activity.

Revisit the tool periodically (e.g., once per semester) to assess progress, celebrate improvements, and plan for continuous quality improvement.

1. Contributions and Participation

- In what ways are families sharing their priorities, goals, and concerns?
- How do families bring in their stories, examples, or resources?
- Where do families have opportunities to co-plan, not just respond?
- What multiple avenues (verbal, written, visual) exist for families to contribute?

Strengths:

Growth Areas:

Linking Engagement to Outcomes

Improved family engagement can support:

- Increased student involvement in IEPs
- Better alignment of post-school goals with student and family priorities
- Higher rates of employment, education, and independent living
- Stronger community-school partnerships

Key Takeaways

- Engagement must reflect the community's values and context
- All families have strengths and capital to contribute
- Non-traditional strategies can be more inclusive and effective
- Evaluation helps tell the story of impact

Your Action Plan

- What's one strategy you'll take back to your school district?
- Write it in the chat.

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