

USC Race and  
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# CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

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By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

Racial Equity Guidance for K-12 Teachers



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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James C. Bridgeforth is an educator, researcher, and policy advocate. He has extensive experience collaborating with practitioners and conducting equity-focused, policy-oriented educational research. Drawing on his professional experiences across K-12 and higher education contexts, his nationally recognized scholarship critically examines issues of racism, power, leadership, and learning in K-12 schools. James holds a PhD in Urban Education Policy (University of Southern California '23), an MEd in Educational Administration and Policy (University of Georgia '17), and a B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (Georgia College & State University '13).

## ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

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# Cultivating Relationships with Families and Communities of Color

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Decades of research outlines the importance of meaningful family engagement practices within K-12 schools (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; Mapp et al., 2022). Evidence continues to build indicating that implementing family engagement practices in schools can have a positive impact on students' academic achievement and outcomes (Wood & Bauman, 2017). In particular, McCarthy Foubert (2023) explains that much of the framing around family engagement has argued that family engagement practices can lead to positive academic outcomes for persistently marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized students) and that schools can provide families with resources and development to support students' growth and achievement.

However, critical family engagement scholars have long argued that prevalent family engagement efforts have largely ignored how the racialized sociopolitical context in which schools are situated influence the ways that family engagement practices occur (Ishimaru, 2019; Rodela & Bertrand, 2021). Family engagement events are often transactional in nature (McCarthy Foubert, 2023) and centered in White-normative practices that prioritize involvement (e.g., volunteering in classrooms and leading fundraisers)

over equitable collaboration (e.g. shared visioning and decision-making) (Ishimaru, 2019). Through narrowly focusing on how to have more parent and family involvement in schools (Ferlazzo, 2011; Shirley, 1997), schools often miss opportunities to reflect on how they might meaningfully partner with their school communities to enhance the experiences of families and students, particularly communities of color who are often situated at the margins of school visioning and decision-making (Baxley, 2022).

Given this reality, this brief details four key practices and approaches that educators can use to promote deeper, meaningful relationships between schools and families and communities of color.

# 1. Prioritize Trust

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A growing body of research consistently demonstrates that building trusting family-school relationships is a key lever for improving school culture and climate (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Herrerra et al., 2020). Yet we also know that there are often significant trust gaps between school staff and families of color.

Some research has explained that these gaps may be influenced by prior negative family-school experiences and the prevalence of racial stereotypes guiding limited interactions (Froiland & Davison, 2014; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Young et al., 2015). Recognizing that families of color may have reasonable doubts in trusting their children's schools, teachers should consider the following prompts in order to proactively bridge potential gaps.

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## Questions for Consideration

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**1**

Our backgrounds, histories, and lived experiences deeply influence how we interact with and trust others. Consider providing space to listen to and learn from your students' families stories.

- a. How might you facilitate a process of learning about families' experiences with school so far? Could you use phone calls? Surveys? Home visits?

**2**

Critical self-awareness and reflection are key to building trust with families. Mapp and Bergman (2021) offer four questions that can be helpful in guiding your trust-building work with families:

- a. Am I seeking input from, and do I listen to and value, what all families have to say?
- b. Am I demonstrating to all families that I am competent and that I see them as competent and valuable caretakers?
- c. Do I keep my word with families?
- d. Do I show families that I value and care about them as people?

## 2. Honor the Diversity of Family Structures and Experiences

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Recognizing and honoring the diversity of family structures is a practice that is critically important to cultivating relationships with families and communities of color. Despite the persistence of normative conceptions of a ‘nuclear family’ (e.g., a father, mother, and children in one household), many families live a vastly different reality (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) estimates that grandparents are the primary caretaker for more than 2.5 million children in the U.S.

Children in our schools are often raised by single parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and countless other configurations that may not align with White normative understandings of who makes up a family. In particular, close to 25% Asian, Black, and Hispanic Americans lived in multigenerational households in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2022).

These data offer an opportunity for teachers to revisit and potentially reframe the ways that they engage with families of color through ensuring inclusive language practices.

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## Questions for Consideration

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**1**

Consider the language that is typically used in formal and informal communication with families. Is it traditional (e.g., moms and dads) or inclusive of the diversity of family structures?

**2**

Do classroom materials (e.g., books, posters, flyers) demonstrate a broadened understanding of family structures? If not, what can you do to address this issue?

### 3. Lean into Collaboration & Engagement over Involvement

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Family engagement and family involvement are often used synonymously in educational spaces. However these terms represent markedly different approaches to the roles that families can play within schools (Ferland, 2011; Shirley, 1997). Involvement, for example, can broadly be explained as the traditional, passive role of families providing special supports to the school community when requested. Engagement, however, positions families as change agents within their school communities, actively involved in supporting student learning (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

However, Ishimaru (2019) reminds us that despite the turn toward engagement over involvement, these approaches do not always meaningfully attend to issues of “power, race, class, language, citizenship status, and other dynamics that infuse educational institutions and shape opportunities for nondominant families to “partner” with schools in educational reform” (p. 5). Instead, they

can reaffirm the status quo within schools by maintaining traditional approaches to family-school partnership, albeit under a different name.

If families are believed to be partners in education, teachers must be willing and able to interrogate the ways that existing practices within their school communities facilitate or inhibit reciprocal, relational strategies that leverage the knowledge and wisdom of families to advance student growth and wellbeing.



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## Questions for Consideration

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**1**

What is the current approach to family-school partnership in your context? Does your approach lean more toward involvement, engagement, or collaboration?

**2**

Consider how you are facilitating conversations about race, class, power, and family engagement practices within your contexts.

- a. If you are not currently facilitating these conversations, reflect on why that may be the case.
- b. If you are, what examples are you using to promote relationship-centered practices?

## 4. Assume the Best and Use Asset-based Approaches

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Previous research has demonstrated how it is critical that educators maintain an asset-based approach to building relationships with families of color centering their inherent knowledge, expertise, and wisdom (Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). Yet, deficit-based assumptions about families of color remain a regular occurrence in K-12 schools (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). These assumptions do not account for nontraditional (i.e. Eurocentric) methods of family involvement that also support student learning but can be less visible to educators as they largely occur outside of the school building. For example, Ishimaru (2019) explains that “...many Mexican American parents pass on culturally embedded consejos (advice) to their children and emphasize the value of hard work as forms of engagement, but these practices are often disregarded by schools” (p. 4). Families may be inaccurately assumed to be “hard to reach” or lacking interest in school involvement, when many are simply unable to access the primarily school-based involvement



opportunities due to work constraints or other barriers such as language access or transportation.

If we know these factors to be true, educators can address these issues, at least in part, through using alternative methods outside of centering the school building as the only source of involvement. For example, Baxter and Toe (2023) offer evidence that social media posts can be leveraged to facilitate student-centered learning opportunities rather than unidirectional posts depicting student learning that has already occurred. Even within school buildings, educators can draw on the expertise of families to co-design learning opportunities that meaningfully center families’ cultural knowledge and experiences.

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## Questions for Consideration

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**1**

How do educators in your context describe the families within your school community?

- a. What assets and strengths do they bring to the community?
- b. How might these assets be leveraged to support student learning opportunities?

**2**

What opportunities currently exist for families to collaborate around student learning in your schools?

- a. How might these opportunities be redesigned to incorporate more families?
- b. Who might you reach out to in order to begin this work?

# Looking Ahead

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Histories of schooling in America can often be characterized as histories of exclusion and othering. Examples range from exclusion of people of color from physical spaces through segregated schooling to exclusion of people of color from Eurocentric curricula and materials. Efforts to cultivate relationships with families of color must both acknowledge these histories and center a commitment to belonging for all families.

To be clear, belonging goes beyond an essence of tolerance or acceptance. Members of a community where belonging is the norm are seen, heard, valued, and are able to challenge systems, structures, and existing norms. While diversity and inclusion can help to facilitate greater demographic representation within a school, belonging implies safety and the ability not only to be heard, but also the power to shape the future (Powell, 2012).

Schools have not always been welcoming spaces for families and communities of color. Many have been, and continue to be, harmed by these systems. However, that does not have to be the story of our future. The approaches outlined in this brief can help to redefine how families and schools partner to support student learning. Educators have the power to change the trajectory of family-school relationships through building honest, intentional, and asset-based partnerships with families that can meet today's challenges.

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## **ABOUT THE USC RACE AND EQUITY CENTER**

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships.

The Center is home to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and the Alliance for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Business.