

**PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND  
EARLY MATH**  
**A California Landscape Scan**

November 2019

Commissioned by  **HEISING-SIMONS  
FOUNDATION**



1 | Background & Context

## Background

Education First thanks the Heising-Simons Foundation for underwriting our research into early math in California; in particular, we appreciate the generous advice, insights and support from program officer Kimberly Brenneman throughout the project. In addition, Education First is grateful to the staff of the Fresno Unified School District and nonprofit family engagement organizations in California who provided their time and insights to inform this landscape scan (*see full list of nonprofit organizations on slide 8*). This presentation of findings, as well as any omissions or errors, is the responsibility of Education First alone.



The Heising-Simons Foundation is a family foundation based in Los Altos and San Francisco, California. The foundation works with its partners to advance sustainable solutions in climate and clean energy, enable groundbreaking research in science, enhance the education of our youngest learners, and support human rights for all people.

Education First is a national, mission-driven strategy and policy organization with deep expertise in education improvement. Its mission is to deliver exceptional ideas, experience-based solutions and results so all students—and particularly low-income students and students of color—are prepared for success in college, career and life.



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## The Heising-Simons Foundation supports innovations to help low-income students and students of color—from school entry to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade—learn math well

### What?



The long-term goal of the foundation's new "Creating Coherent Early Math Instruction in California" initiative is to ensure that students from families with low incomes and children of color are appropriately challenged and supported in math instruction in the early years of school to reach proficiency by 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

### "Early math" defined

*Early math generally can include any formal or informal mathematics instruction or learning for children, from birth to age 8. For this landscape scan, Education First focused on engagement efforts primarily for families for students in grades PK to 3.*

### Why?



A growing body of research reveals that early mathematical skills—and growth in these skills over the early elementary years—correlate more strongly with academic skills in later elementary school than any other early indicator. Research also shows that children from families with low incomes and children of color are less likely than their peers to be proficient in math by 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

### How?



The foundation's priorities for grantmaking include: (1) Developing toolkits of high-quality curricula, formative assessments and professional development models, (2) Identifying the facilitators and barriers encountered by districts that have prioritized greater coherence in their approach to early math, and (3) Building the case for the effectiveness of a coherent math approach in districts across California.

## In particular, as one approach to improving outcomes for early learners in mathematics, the Foundation is learning more about family engagement needs and challenges in California

Family engagement can be defined as a *shared responsibility* to involve families in *meaningful ways* to actively support their children's learning and development

Research suggests that *students with involved parents achieve better outcomes*: They are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better in school, develop better social skills and go on to post-secondary education

### How has California prioritized family engagement in schools?

- As part of the state's new school funding system, school districts are now required to engage parents and community members in setting goals and spending priorities as part of creating *Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs)*
- LCAPs must focus on eight statewide priorities, one of which is parent involvement and parent participation in activities to help meet student needs

## Education First conducted a “mini” landscape scan to enhance understanding of family engagement efforts in California as one of four research projects for the Foundation in 2019

1. PK–3 Policy and Networks Landscape Scan

2. Case Studies of Promising District Efforts

3. Opportunities for Engaging Families

4. In-Depth Research into District Efforts (led by PACE)

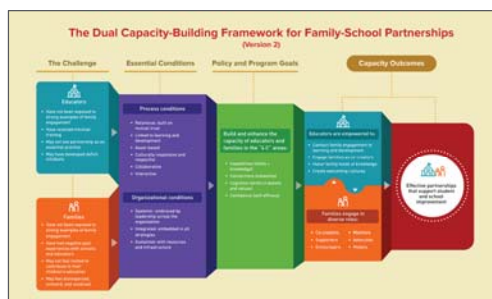
### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- What are the promising practices in California for successfully engaging parents of younger migrant, dual language/immigrant, black, Latino or Asian/Pacific-Islander students?
- What are examples of California counties, school districts, early childhood education providers, networks and nonprofit organizations with a strong commitment to engaging parents of preschoolers and primary grade students?
- What opportunities are there to strengthen family engagement, especially in math, in California counties with the greatest student needs?

### METHODOLOGY

- Conducted in-depth interviews with executive directors or family engagement specialists from nine California-based nonprofits (as well as one district family engagement specialist)
- Conducted web-based research on the 9 organizations (see slide 8) plus others and reviewed general family engagement frameworks and research

## In our research, Education First found two widely used resources—one national, one California-developed—that suggest elements of successful family engagement efforts



### Dual Capacity-Building Framework

- This framework is based on the work of Harvard University researchers, including family-school partnership expert Karen Mapp
- Four of the California nonprofit interviewees noted this framework has influenced their work and approaches
- The framework has significant overlap with approaches interviewees themselves outlined, e.g., building trust; using an asset-based, culturally responsive, respectful and interactive process; and shifting the mindsets of educators and families

### California Family Engagement Framework

- Also featuring input from Karen Mapp of Harvard, the California Department of Education's framework is a resource for school district leaders
- It establishes 18 principles within five program dimensions for effective family and community engagement
- Examples of the 18 principles include: help educators and staff learn to work with parents as equal partners; involve families in advisory bodies; provide resources



Sources: [Family Engagement Framework](#), California Department of Education, 2014, Mapp, K. L. & Bergman, E. (2019) and [Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships \(v2\)](#).

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## We also interviewed staff of nine organizations (plus one school district) focused on family engagement; we asked these leaders to identify others doing this work well in California

### NONPROFIT / COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED

- Abriendo Puertas (Opening Doors)
- California Math Festivals
- Families in Schools
- Parent Engagement Academy
- Parent Institute for Quality Education
- Parent Organization Network
- Parent Teacher Home Visits
- Tandem Partners in Early Learning
- Oakland Starting Smart and Strong

Note: Brief profiles of all 15 of these organizations can be found in the Appendix

### INTERVIEWEES IDENTIFIED OTHER NOTABLE ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

- California Association for Bilingual Education
- High Expectations
- Lotus Bloom
- Mission Economic Development Association
- Para Los Ninos
- Puente



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## 2 | Comparative Analysis of Family Engagement Efforts in California

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**The nine nonprofit organizations studied employ common approaches to family engagement; only five have any focus on math, but all specifically include families of early learners**

Organization	Trains parents	Trains school staff	Trains or convenes organizations working with families	Conducts parent leadership development & advocacy activities	Includes at least some math focus	Age range of children in targeted families
Abriendo Puertas	X				X	0–5
California Math Festivals					X	PreK–8
Families in Schools	X	X				PreK–12
Parent Engagement Academy	X			X	X	PreK–12
Parent Organization Network			X	X		PreK–12
Parent Institute for Quality Education	X				X	PreK–8
Parent Teacher Home Visits		X				PreK–12
Starting Smart and Strong-Oakland	X	X	X			0–5
Tandem Partners	X		X		X	0–5

Note: We used interviews and a review of websites as sources to create the above summary of approaches the nine organizations are employing. It is possible an organization employs additional approaches to engagement that research did not uncover.

## The nine organizations operate primarily in or near the state's larger cities, although two also work in the Central Valley



## Interviewees agreed that family engagement in math is a need in communities, but specific math programming is limited in four and the focus of only one of these organizations

### SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MATH ACHIEVEMENT IS A NEED...

*"I'm glad they [Heising-Simons Foundation] are focused on math; all the early learning work seems to focus on literacy. The time is right because university systems are taking on new math and science requirements."*

*"I am not aware of other groups engaging families in mathematics."*

### ...BUT, CURRENT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS IN MATH APPEAR TO BE LIMITED IN ALL BUT ONE OF THE NINE ORGANIZATIONS STUDIED

- **Abriendo Puertas:** Uses a parent engagement curriculum that includes one session on family math focused on counting
- **Parent Institute for Quality Education:** Leads a nine-week academy for parents that includes one session on how families can take advantage of daily activities to teach children math and use hands-on activities to teach math concepts, e.g., pattern recognition and sequencing
- **Parent Engagement Academy:** Integrates into its curriculum discussions about the skills students need, including in STEM areas
- **Tandem Partners:** Worked with DREME to pilot new parent resources in math; will soon print materials in English, Spanish and Chinese with tips for families about how to work on math with their children
- **California Math Festivals (organized by California Mathematics Council):** Focuses on math across the PreK-Grade 8 continuum and offers festivals focused on geometry, algebra and numbers

## Three common approaches to effective family engagement (not in mathematics alone) also emerged across the organizations we interviewed



### 1. Take an asset-based, culturally appropriate approach

- Helps educators to uncover biases and confront lower expectations based on race or income level they might have for families they work with
- Is a frequent area of struggle for schools and educators, due to pre-existing mindsets or fears about engaging with families
- Requires emphasis on the shared responsibility for educating children



### 2. Build trust and relationships with families

- Is a non-negotiable for success of any family engagement initiative
- Established via in-person connections, e.g., by talking with parents at home visits (vs. only sending printouts of information), making time for parents to talk about dreams or worries for their children, and including families in decision-making processes
- Can help to overcome negative perceptions some parents might have about schools and teachers



### 3. Include social activities into engagement efforts

- Is preferable for parents over trainings, as “parents would rather do things with their kids” than go to a workshop [without them,]”
- Results in greater parent attendance and gender diversity
- *For example:* One organization created “play and learn” groups, in which parents and children work together, and saw stronger attendance than parent-only workshops

**Note:** The first two approaches above also are referenced in state and national resources (see slide 7); however, the third approach is a unique and important consideration that many interviewees said they also prioritized in their efforts

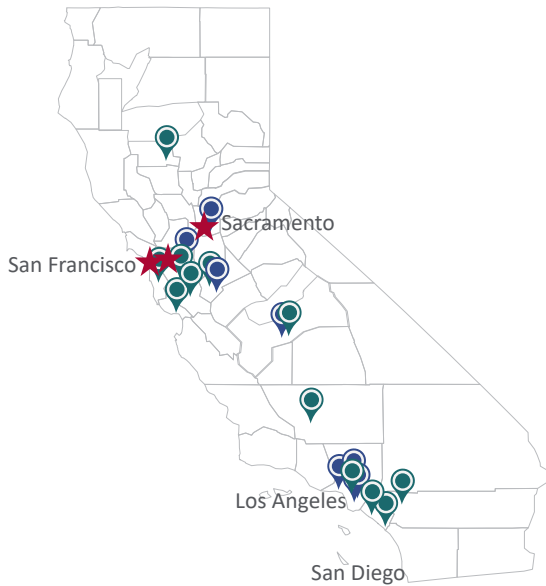
## Interviewees told us that tending to language differences is also essential to family engagement, although they typically do not otherwise differentiate activities for various ethnic communities

**We found the organizations we researched typically do not pursue different engagement strategies for different ethnic communities or parents.** For example, the Parent Organization Network was founded by African-American-, Mexican-American- and Asian-American-focused community-based organizations. The Network implements the same slate of engagement strategies (and convenes the groups together) for the communities these organizations were founded to serve.



And while the organizations we researched reported they also did not modify their family engagement curricula for different populations, they did suggest that tending to language differences is essential to effective engagement—**offering live translation during sessions in participants’ native languages (such as Spanish or Cantonese) and translated written material are important approaches for successfully reaching different communities.**

## Interviewees and a separate 2016 California study identified over a dozen school districts with reputations for effective family engagement efforts—most located in major metropolitan areas



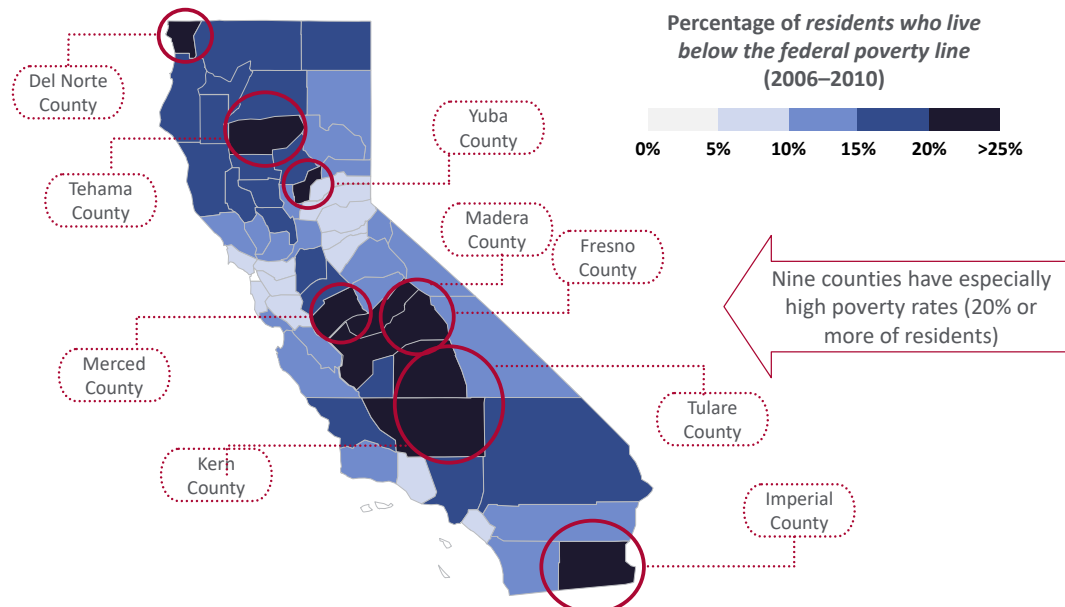
### KEY

- District identified by interviewees
- District identified by Public Policy Institute of California research report (2016)
- ★ District identified by both an interviewee and 2016 report

### NOTES

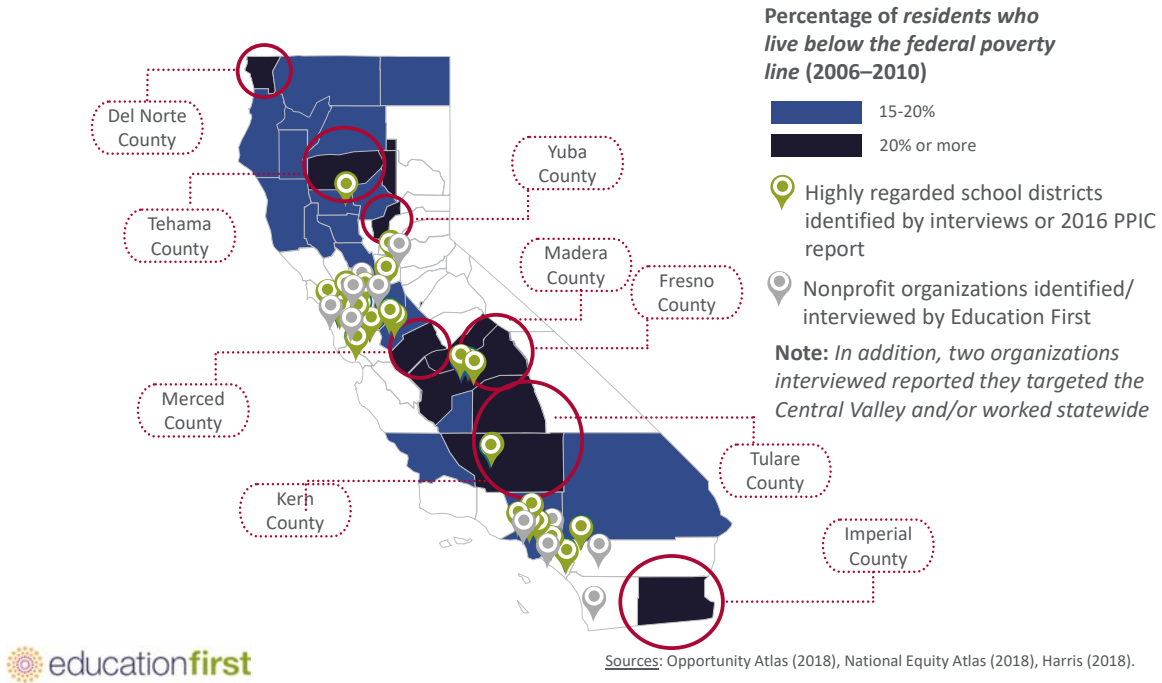
- Interviews self-identified only a handful of districts involved in high-quality family engagement efforts; however, the scope of our research was limited (just 10 interviews total) and there are likely others
- Our research included an interview with the family engagement manager for Fresno Unified School District, which was identified by nonprofit organizations as a district with effective engagement practices
- These highlighted districts (especially those identified by both interviewees and the PPIC report) may provide a starting point for the Foundation and others to learn more about successful efforts in different communities
- See Appendix for complete list of districts

## Education First’s earlier research for the Foundation documented significant poverty in nearly every county in California; in nearly half the counties, 15% or more of residents are very low income





## Considered with a view to the distribution of poverty in California, many of the state’s highest-need communities lack “highly regarded” or targeted family engagement activities



### 3 | Looking Forward: Opportunities and Obstacles to Overcome

## Interviewees elevated three major obstacles to effective family engagement in California

- 1 Insufficient, inflexible funding for family engagement**

  - Limited policymaker recognition of importance of family engagement
  - Funding constrained to only certain types of engagement or limited numbers of parents
  - Resources focused on policymaking versus implementation

*"It's hard for us to serve parents when there's no money to pay for them."*

*"You can meet parent engagement requirements by having 'coffee with a principal' four times a year.... [but] folks do this because they only have a \$300 budget. There isn't funding for communities to actually be engaged."*
- 2 Mindsets that don't promote true partnerships**

  - Limited insight into how parents can be co-creators, partners and assets
  - Presence of bias and institutional racism among educators that limits family engagement practice
  - Low understanding of structures that best allow parents to engage

*"We still have a long way to go with teachers to understand that families that don't speak English have assets. You have to identify biases first to have a culture of acceptance."*

*"I've seen a series of events where parents are expected to show up eight straight Wednesdays. This is not reasonable."*
- 3 Lack of educator training and knowledge**

  - Preparation (pre-service) requirements for teacher about family engagement limited only to educators of special populations
  - Lack of cultural competence to engage with families that aren't the same race/class as educators

*"There are existing expectations to bridge from school to families for some teachers...special education, early childhood or bi-lingual. For general education teachers, these expectations don't exist, and are...focused on instruction."*

*"Pre-service teachers don't get family engagement 101. Many teachers who go into communities aren't equipped."*

## But interviewees also identified five opportunities they see today in California to advance family engagement strategically

- 1 Target improved family engagement in rural communities**

  - Four interviewees noted that rural communities rarely receive prioritized supports, tools or resources from nonprofit agencies focused on family engagement
  - The two interviewees who named specific communities identified the Central Valley, Imperial Valley and rural migrant communities as having the greatest needs

*"Rural communities are so underserved. Urban districts get a lot of attention, but the rural communities are not on a lot of peoples' radars."*

*"Immigrant and rural communities, such as in the Central Valley and Imperial Valley, is where there's the least amount of activity."*
- 2 Capitalize on new state-level focus for early learning**

  - Interviewees noted that Governor Newsom has prioritized early learning—he recently led an effort to secure \$245 million in state funding for early childhood, including dollars for facilities and screening
  - New state law (2019's Assembly Bill 06) calls for the development of a state plan for early childhood
  - California's Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood published a 2019 report that encourages educators to address implicit bias they may have toward families

*"I see opportunity at the state level, even though there's still more work needed in early education. I can see big changes for parents. We're still having problems: Many in low-income communities do not have access to quality early education."*

*"Governor Newsom's focus on early childhood presents a real opportunity."*

## But interviewees also identified five opportunities they see today in California to advance family engagement strategically

### 3 Improve engagement efforts to support families in black communities in particular

- The organizations Education First research all have a far greater presence in immigrant and Latinx communities than African-American communities
- Education First’s research found few California-based organizations prioritizing engagement of African-American families... although notably [High Expectations](#) in Oakland has worked extensively with this population

*“We don’t see as much participation from African-American families.”*

*“We’ve tried partnering with housing authorities [to engage African-American families], and that has been a tough nut to crack because of the bureaucracy.”*

### 4 Improve pre-service training for teachers

- California’s [Teaching Performance Expectations \(TPEs\)](#)—which outline pre-service learning expectations—are organized into six domains, none of which call out family engagement as a priority. The TPEs refer to family outreach mostly in the context of communicating expectations, grades and classroom issues
- The Parent Organization Network in Los Angeles County has undertaken a research study on teacher credentialing to inform a potential advocacy effort

*“One thing we have been dipping our toe in is that we’ve had a longstanding relationship with Sacramento State University to work in pre-service, to work with those getting credentialed. This is a community we need to pay attention to. Teachers should come out of the program knowing that family engagement is part of your job as a teacher.”*

## But interviewees also identified five opportunities they see today in California to advance family engagement strategically

### 5 Take advantage of recent changes to Local Control Accountability Plan requirements to strengthen districts’ family engagement strategies

- A new, more rigorous self-reflection tool for the “Parent and Family Engagement” element of the LCAP has the potential to provide new opportunities for more rigorous school-based family engagement
- Specifically, the tool has been upgraded from one question an administrator on his/her own could answer to a tool that requires school staff and parents to discuss and answer questions in three categories: building relationships, building partnerships for student outcomes and seeking input for decision making

*“The first version of the LCAP self-reflection tool was very simple—it just required administrators to do the exercise. They completed a paragraph and uploaded it to the dashboard. Now there are 12 questions to answer. It’s not just an administrator reflecting; it’s school staff and families that are supposed to have conversations and they’re supposed to rate themselves. It also requires continuous improvement. We have been focusing on training parents to be part of decision-making in districts.”*



## 3 | Appendix

### Organization Profiles and List of School Districts Identified as Implementing Strong Engagement Practices

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## We interviewed nine organizations that work in family engagement across California *(this one first of three summary slides)*

### ABRIENDO PUERTAS *Birth–Age 5*

- National organization that works with districts and community-based organizations to implement a parent-developed 10-session curriculum
- The curriculum promotes school readiness, family well-being and advocacy by addressing best practices in areas such as brain development, early childhood development, early literacy and math, bilingualism, technology and attendance
- **Geographies of focus: the Central Valley, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco**

### CALIFORNIA FAMILY MATH FESTIVALS *PreK–Grade 8*

- Works with individual schools to provide family mathematics festivals for up to 200 people in one of three areas: algebra, geometry and numbers.
- Designs festivals to expose students and families to challenging mathematics topics in a hands-on atmosphere
- Has hosted, to date, over 1,000 festivals in partnership with schools
- **Geography of focus: Statewide**

### FAMILIES IN SCHOOLS *PreK–Grade 12*

- Provides professional development modules to 15 districts to foster “authentic parent engagement” by building the skills, knowledge and confidence of both parents and staff on how to work together
- Modules focus on parent engagement, welcoming environments, parent outreach and school transitions
- **Geographies of focus: Bakersfield, Fresno, the Inland Empire and San Francisco**

## We interviewed nine organizations that work in family engagement across California *(this one second of three summary slides)*

### OAKLAND STARTING SMART AND STRONG *Birth-Age 5*

- “Collective impact” effort funded by the Packard Foundation; coordinates schools, government agencies, nonprofits and community agencies to work for more effective ways of meeting needs of families with early learners
- Has created pilot parent leadership training program and is developing a framework for early childhood community hubs called “Family Resource Centers”
- **Geography of focus:** *Oakland*

### PARENT INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION *PreK–Grade 8*

- Sponsors as its signature effort a nine-week workshop designed to inspire parents to take an active role in ensuring their children’s success.
- Runs Early Childhood Development program to support parents in stimulating language development and reading and math skills, as well as the Early K–3 Literacy Program to introduce parents to academic standards for K-12 public schools
- **Geographies of focus:** *36 of 58 California counties, serving over 17,000 families*

### PARENT ORGANIZATION NETWORK *PreK– Grade 12*

- Supports staff and leaders from its 14 community organization members to build the skills of actively engaged parents to transform the public-school system
- Advocated for improving parent involvement in district adoption of LCAPs (helping to develop the family engagement reflection tool) and issued report calling for more family engagement in teacher pre-service training
- **Geographies of focus:** *Los Angeles*

## We interviewed nine organizations that work in family engagement across California *(this one third of three summary slides)*

### PARENT TEACHER HOME VISITS *PreK–Grade 12*

- National organization that works to build relationships, skills and engagement for families, educators and students
- Provides teachers with three-hour training on how to use a “relational model” (focusing the hopes and dreams families have for their children) during home visits
- **Geographies of focus:** *Elk Grove, Oakland, Palm Springs, Sacramento City, San Diego, San Jose, Sweetwater*

### TANDEM PARTNERS IN EARLY LEARNING *Birth-Age 5*

- Provides free community-based workshops to families to deepen their knowledge of early childhood brain development and strategies for building literacy
- Offers customized trainings to help organizations embed early learning and family engagement efforts within their work; operates a parent leadership development program for community members
- **Geographies of focus:** *San Francisco (primary); Alameda and Contra Costa counties*

### THE PARENT ENGAGEMENT ACADEMY *PreK–Grade 12*

- Supports 10 school districts’ efforts to engage families at school sites
- Provides seven consecutive weeks of trainings to help parents successfully navigate the school system and learn their own roles and responsibilities as parents; encourages and supports parents’ engagement as leaders (such as part of school site councils or district LCAP committees)
- **Geography of focus:** *Los Angeles County*

## The nonprofit organizations we interviewed identified several others also sponsoring notable family engagement efforts in California *(this one first of three summary slides)*

### CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION FOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION (CABE) K–Grade 12

- Nonprofit organization that promotes bilingual and quality education experiences for all students K–12 in California
- CABE’s i3-funded “Project 2INSPIRE” [Family, School and Community Engagement Program](#) has a strong component for developing parent leaders at the school and district levels
  - + The project seeks to increase the efficacy and confidence of parents by enhancing their ability to be active in the school community and in leadership roles and to work collaboratively with others in the community; another goal is to strengthen respectful relationships between parents and schools
  - + Parent leaders have achieved the program’s “mastery” or “expert” level of training and worked over 100 hours with a parent specialist assigned to their school
- **Geography of focus:** *Statewide*

### HIGH EXPECTATIONS *Families of children* PreK–Grade 12

- School-focused consulting firm that operates a family engagement learning institute and four family education series including one focused on ages 3–5 and another called “Ready for Kindergarten”
- Partners with school districts and schools in the Oakland area to implement its training programs for both school staff and families
- Has a particular focus on African-American families
- **Geographies of focus:** *Oakland*

## The nonprofit organizations we interviewed identified several others also sponsoring notable family engagement efforts in California *(this one second of three summary slides)*

### LOTUS BLOOM *Families of children* Birth–Age 3

- Seeks to be a place where families can celebrate their cultural, linguistic and unique diversity
- At downtown Oakland location, it hosts a family engagement night once a month to build community (each convening includes a potluck dinner) and to offer enrichment opportunities for children
- Operates a leadership program for parents, providing team-building, professional development and peer mentoring activities
- **Geography of focus:** *Oakland*

### MISSION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION *Birth–Age 18*

- Has a mission to support the success of low- and moderate-income Latino families in San Francisco’s Mission District neighborhood by promoting economic equity and social justice through asset-building and community development
- One of its major programs is the [Mission Promise Neighborhood](#), a community partnership created to support kids and families living, working and attending school in the Mission District
- Brings together schools, colleges, community organizations and community leaders to help kids graduate and families achieve financial stability
- Employs family success coaches to connect families with local resources and support families as they interact with schools
- **Geography of focus:** *San Francisco*

## The nonprofit organizations we interviewed identified several others also sponsoring notable family engagement efforts in California *(this one third of three summary slides)*

### PARA LOS NIÑOS (PLN) Birth-Age 5

- Operates Head Start programs serving 450 children
- Operates Gratts Primary Center for children in transitional kindergarten through first grade and charter elementary and middle schools
- Supports parent/family development through asset-based trainings and leadership development activities and by linking them to other community services
- Provides mental health services—including couples counseling and family therapy—and wrap-around services, including food assistance, motel vouchers and community-wide events to promote socialization between families
- Geography of focus:** *Greater Los Angeles area*

### PUENTE Families of children all ages

- Advocates for Latino communities living in the Los Angeles, San Diego and Silicon Valley areas and leverages resources that foster economic prosperity and security and that promote individual and community health and wellness
- Offers to families English as a second language courses; a Plaza Comunitaria for those interested in completing their matriculation certificate in primary and/or secondary education through the Mexican Consulate; HiSET/GED tutoring for those interested in completing their high school equivalency; and academic supports around college tutoring, enrolling in community college or vocational programs and more
- Geography of focus:** *San Mateo County and South Coast communities*

## Asked by Education First, interviewees identified 11 California school districts with reputations for high quality family engagement

School District	County
Ceres Unified School District	Stanislaus
Compton Unified School District	Los Angeles
Elk Grove Unified School district	Sacramento
Fresno Unified School District	Fresno
Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles
Lennox School District	Los Angeles
<b>Oakland Unified School District*</b>	<b>Alameda</b>
Paramount Unified School District	Los Angeles
Pittsburg Unified School District	Contra Costa
<b>Sacramento City Unified School District*</b>	<b>Sacramento</b>
<b>San Francisco Unified School District*</b>	<b>San Francisco</b>

**The Public Policy Institute of California identified 14 school districts doing high quality family engagement work in California—though it did not suggest there were no more**

School District	County
Bakersfield Unified School District	Kerns
Hayward Unified School District	Alameda
Live Oak Unified School District	Santa Cruz
Lynwood Unified School District	Los Angeles
Milipitas Unified School District	Santa Clara
<b>Oakland Unified School District</b>	<b>Alameda</b>
Redwood City School District	San Mateo
Riverside Unified School District	Riverside
<b>Sacramento City Unified School District*</b>	<b>Sacramento</b>
Sanger Unified School District	Fresno
San Diego Unified School District	Orange
<b>San Francisco Unified School District*</b>	<b>San Francisco</b>
Santa Ana Unified School District	Orange
Sylvan Union School District	Stanislaus



\*Districts identified by both an Education First interviewee and 2016 Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) report 31



**Thank you!**  
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